

Robert Edwin, Associate Editor

The Courage for Change

Nancy Bos



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“People grow through experience if they meet life honestly and courageously.”

— Eleanor Roosevelt

MEETING LIFE *honestly* for me meant I needed to be singing and teaching in order to feel fulfilled. It wasn't, however, a matter of *courage* until I took a long look at what kind of music I *honestly* wanted to pursue and what changes I would need to make both in myself and in my teaching. In the six years since switching my specialty from classical to CCM (Contemporary Commercial Music), I have heard stories from dozens of other teachers struggling with the same dilemmas I faced as a singer and teacher. Many of us have experienced cultural bias, vocal education limited to classical singing, and vocal health concerns regarding belting. As both a performer and teacher, I have faced the possibility of failure, scorn of colleagues, and distrust of potential students. Undoubtedly, switching genres has meant substantial risk, but accepting that risk was absolutely essential to the integrity of my career—essential to growing toward my full potential.

The story of my early development is a very simple one. I was raised in South Dakota. My mother, an Iowa farm girl, enjoyed listening to classical symphonies and reading every massive book she could get her hands on. My father listened to Johnny Cash and Anne Murray and preferred watching Sonny and Cher to reading a book. In my teen years, I knew—as so many of our high school singers know—that I couldn't be happy without singing. The music that was taught in my public school was mostly classical and my vocal education at Luther College was entirely classical. My radio, however, was always tuned to rock. Dad thought I would be happier “studying jazz or something,” but if that was an option, it was beyond the scope of our knowledge.

Post-college, I had a high enough level of performance anxiety that I avoided singing solos and doing auditions. I directed and sang in choirs and, after my husband Jeff Costlow and I moved to Los Alamos, NM, I enjoyed a wonderful mentorship from Dr. Candace Magner. Dr. Magner inspired me to become an independent voice teacher in an environment where there were many hobby singers seeking skills in a variety of genres. However, any thought of performing was easily put aside in consideration of raising my growing family.

In my mid-thirties I confronted performance anxiety head-on through counseling, hypnotherapy, and participating in NATSAA. I gained a lot of

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ground on the herd of butterflies that largely formed their chrysalides from the usual causes: criticism, perceptions of the audience, and self-doubt. However, I did not fully master the butterflies until I realized that the genre I was singing in was part of the problem. You see, I never fully enjoyed most classical singing. The only classical songs I could really be pleased with were the extremely dramatic songs, like Schubert's "Rastlose Liebe," or anything composed by Jake Heggie. Therefore, I never had confidence that I was pleasing to listeners because I didn't appreciate listening to myself. In addition, I felt like a fraud calling myself a singer when there were many genres I could no longer sing in an appropriate voice, such as belt music theater songs, the rock songs of my youth, and the entire genre of gospel music. I didn't understand why I could no longer do what I did as a child. I began to doubt that my classical training was actually superior, as my culture and education had led me to believe.

Shortly after competing in NATSAA, three major events occurred almost simultaneously that opened doors in my mind about the possibilities for singing and teaching. First, I was accepted into the Seattle Ladies Musical Club, an audition-only organization comprised of the highest caliber of musicians that provides free recital venues and accompanists. Over the intervening years I have performed two to three classical half-recitals per year, mostly centered around modern English language composers. The next big change occurred when I participated in the NATS Intern Program for 2005, and I still benefit from on-going mentorship from two of the Master Teachers: Robert Edwin and Dr. Scott McCoy. Finally, I was cast in the role of Frederic in a community theater production of *The Pirates of Penzance*. That experience changed my perception of the human voice.

Under the direction of Penelope Vrachopoulos, Eastside Lyric Theater's production of *The Pirates of Penzance* was fully cast when the tenor playing Frederic quit during the rehearsal process. No men were available to replace him, so instead of standing by while Penelope cancelled the show, I asked to be considered for the part. Due to my strong chest voice, developed in part during my study with the late Julian Patrick, she accepted. I proceeded to master the music in the tenor range, learn to move like a young man, and memorize my lines in four weeks—just enough time to learn the part. The biggest

challenge was strengthening my thyroarytenoid (TA) muscles to the point that I could do the whole show three times each weekend. We modified any phrases that went below an E^b₃, and for the rest of the range I trained like an operatic tenor. I was able to increase my range for a convincing tenor high note from a G[#]₄ to a B₄ during the rehearsal period. I also spent approximately thirty percent of all vocalizing in my soprano range to serve both as a vocal health barometer and to ensure I didn't lose agility and balance.

The director felt I was convincing enough as a man to try to fool the audience. To that end, my name was stated in the program as N. Bos. The costumer built a costume that restricted my feminine shape and I wore a small mustache. The result was that many people in the audience had no idea that I was a woman. Professional actors in the audience approached me with disbelief that they had witnessed such a remarkable transformation, and Eastside Lyric still calls me "the hot tenor."

Vocally, I attained my goal of an authentic young operatic tenor sound without compromising my vocal health in any way. I was able to dramatically increase the strength and stamina of my TA muscles; however, I was not able to translate that to a female belting sound. I lacked the coordination and perhaps the strength in my cricothyroid (CT) muscles to cover the belt roles that I really wanted to play. By only changing resonance, I was able to transform the B₄ to a thick belt sound with short duration, but that was the ceiling. It took another six months before I had the technique to sustain a Belters High C (C₅) and, over the next three years, was able to develop my belting coordination to sustain an F₅ as well as proficiency at a mix for my entire range.

I am now very pleased to say that I can do it all. I can sing everything from Morten Lauridson's "O Magnum Mysterium" to the rock group Heart's "Magic Man." I have performed in one or two musicals each year, most recently performing "I Could Have Danced All Night," and belting out the duet "Bosom Buddies," among other songs, for a theater benefit, and then the character roll of Widow Corney, and the Milk Maid in a production of *Oliver!*

I receive more satisfaction, however, in what I am now able to teach. Whether the next student through the door is my operatic soprano, my Jewish cantor, my punk female singer, or my heavy metal male singer, I can, with knowl-

edge and confidence guide the singer to healthy vocals, accurate stylization, and range extension. And with this comes complete knowledge that all of those sounds are also accessible in my instrument.

Given everything I've learned about singing since the internship—through lectures, texts, observation, and mentorship—the crucial knowledge I've gained is that males and females are singing with essentially the same larynx. The difference between the larynx of a man and a woman is no more than the difference between their hands, kneecaps, or chins—it is almost entirely a matter of proportions and size. Occasionally there will be a man with a smaller larynx than most women, and vice versa. For example, Bea Arthur sang with a deeper resonance than Michael Jackson. It is very likely that this was due to the size of the instrument as well as how the instrument was used; however, it had nothing to do with fundamental anatomic differences. Bea Arthur loved to sing in her TA dominant voice, while it was more common to hear Michael Jackson in a mix and CT dominant voice. Another comparison is music theater actress Sutton Foster to the lead singer of Led Zeppelin, Robert Plant. When Robert Plant belted out “Hey, Hey Mama,” he used the same basic muscle formation that Sutton Foster used when she sang, “Gimme, Gimme That Thing Called Love.” When 60s pop icon Frankie Valli sang “Sherry Baby,” it was nearly the same as the faux belt that music theater actress Stephanie D'Abruzzo used through large sections of “Fine, Fine Line” from *Avenue Q*. Vinson Cole, operatic tenor, made a beautiful recording of “J'aime l'amour” by Bizet where his G₄ is remarkably similar in both sound and spectral analysis to a young Ethel Merman's mix on the same G₄ and higher. And finally, when Freddie Mercury, of the rock band Queen, melted hearts with the high section of “Somebody to Love,” it wasn't terribly different from most of jazz singer Jane Monheit's vocals.

The benefit of this anatomically based understanding is how much it simplifies understanding of my own singing and teaching. Developing the strength and coordination in a man's belt or mix is no different than doing the same for a female. The only consideration is regarding the individual; it is essential to become familiar with the singer's full range, without assumptions based on gender, before setting parameters for appropriate range goals. Therefore, my very typical vocal anatomy allows me to make all of these sounds in the appropriate range

for myself and, as a result, allows me to help my students. This scientific demystification of the voice clears the way for understanding every voice I hear. It has guided my exploration and helped each student find success in crossing musical genres one hundred percent of the time while using the voice in the most healthy and informed ways. Understanding the fundamental physiology of the voice is essential to CCM instruction.

Without a doubt, the risk to my career has been worth it. Looking back on my metamorphosis, I see that I have gained a deeper knowledge of the science, psychology, and art of singing than I could have, had I stayed the course of only classical singing. Every day, I benefit as a performer who can easily cross genres and as a teacher who can more efficiently and sensitively guide students toward their goals. By finding the *courage* to follow my *honest* dream, I have grown in extraordinary ways. I would never return to my previous way of singing and teaching, and I emphatically encourage all voice teachers to learn, explore and take risks to reach their own goals. We are following in the steps of great vocal pioneers; the knowledge we need is available, we only need to accept and embrace it.

Nancy Bos is the creator of *Singing 101*, a beginning voice instruction CD set, and *Vocal Workout: Strength and Flexibility*, a vocal exercise CD built on pop, rock, and the blues. She has maintained an independent studio since 1995 as both a singing teacher and coach, and has taught as adjunct faculty at Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle. Nancy regularly serves as a voice clinician for international singer/songwriter workshops, and has led music theater master classes in Canada and the U.S. She teaches an integrated method that includes voice technique, repertoire development, and performing skills. Her students include professionals in rock, country, pop, music theater, and classical, as well as beginners learning how to match pitches, improve technique, or discover personal style.

Performances for Nancy have included a rock cover band, several compilation CDs, a solo Christmas CD, numerous musicals, and a number of professional classical recitals. She holds a BA from Luther College in Decorah, Iowa and is currently working toward NYSTA's Distinguished Voice Professional Certificate. Nancy, a former NATS Intern, has benefited from extended private mentorships with Dr. Candace Magner and Robert Edwin. She is Secretary of the Northwest Chapter of the Voice Foundation, and serves NATS as the District Governor for Western Washington and cochair for the Independent Studio/Collegiate Studio Liaison Task Team. Nancy lives and teaches in Bellevue, Washington, a suburb of Seattle, and spends volunteer hours with the Bellevue Youth Theatre working with kids and adults of all abilities. www.nancy@studiobos.com.