

# BECOMING A SCHOLAR OF THE VOICE: FLEXING NEW MUSCLES AT THE MANNES SCHOOL OF MUSIC

by

JENNIFER ZETLAN

I am an aspiring opera performer, a career path that involves a great deal of study and a deep understanding of the techniques of singing and acting. After my second year undergraduate jury, Beth Roberts, Mannes School of Music internship coordinator and pedagogy teacher, asked me to participate in an internship through a partnership between the Mannes School and the Metropolitan Opera Guild. Beth wanted very much to guide us to an understanding that the process of becoming an artist was more than the relentless mastery of technique; rather, the whole artist worked just as diligently on the craft of teaching and on the careful, reasoned, documented examination of how one's artistry and teaching work best.

The internship not only gave me a great opportunity to learn new ways of teaching music, but also helped me solidify my understanding of the basic concepts of what I do almost automatically every day as a singer. Perhaps most importantly, the internship greatly expanded my pedagogical knowledge of singing. Since it is easy to see the benefits of certain muscular tensions and/or relaxations in a young singer who is experimenting with technique, I found my interactions with my students helped me experience vocal pedagogy in a way that was more meaningful and real than it had seemed in my previous classes and discussions. By the end of the internship, I found I was not simply a singer, or a teacher of singing; I'd become "a scholar of the voice."

As the Artist-Teacher-Scholar model guided our program, the important questions I had to ask myself throughout the year were: *How does this program facilitate my growth as a practitioner of each of these roles individually? How does the program foster awareness of how these roles overlap? And perhaps most important, how do I take on these three roles while also dealing with other aspects of teaching, such as classroom management?*

I was assigned to Frank Sinatra High School, a magnet school requiring its potential students to audition for placement. Our team of three interns was to teach both the large choral group, comprised of mostly freshmen and sophomores, and also the select choir of sophomores and juniors. We agreed that at some point we would begin working the select choir class as a master class, so the students could bring in their NYSSMA solos. The large choir, about fifty students, was our chance to work with sections, and sometimes individuals, in locations all over the school. I felt fortunate that all of the classroom management was taken care of for us. The teacher was in the classroom at all times and was extremely supportive. We also had the support of our coordinator, Nevena Arizanovic, as well as each other in case we found we weren't sure exactly what to say or do. So in that sense, we were protected and could work directly on the aspects of teaching we wanted to focus on. Maybe this doesn't reflect a real-life classroom situation (or only the best kind of classroom), but as a first-year intern, I was thankful to be able to focus most intently on my development as an Artist-Teacher-Scholar.

Even so, in the beginning I was unsure of everything I did. I had practiced on my classmates, but they were excellent musicians already. It was difficult to project what kinds of problems we might encounter in the school. We never could have guessed that we

might meet a young student who was likely to be countertenor. Since I have no direct knowledge of the developing male voice, I could rely only on second-hand information from other singers' experiences, or research. As a result, we were able only to address issues in his singing that were not directly related to vocal production. This was a small example, but it made me realize that I would come upon hundreds of unfamiliar situations and that I could not possibly be prepared for them all. In fact, there were times at the school when I didn't know exactly where to start. Because I was feeling like a student myself, I didn't have the proper confidence to lead a class. One particular visit was awful. I went to the school by myself, and many of the students just didn't want to listen to anything. I felt bogged down by the students who were talking instead of listening and hardly noticed the students who were trying to participate. I left that day feeling like I was losing their interest, and that made me feel that I was a poor teacher. I felt defeated and insulted.

On the train back, however, I thought about my role as an artist in their classroom. I reminded myself that I was not there to discipline, and that it was probably not possible to reach fifty-five kids at once. I discussed this issue with my pedagogy class, and we came to the same conclusion. Teenagers will, after all, be teenagers; if we sought to reach the ones who were there to listen, eventually the others would likely listen as well. As a result of these reflections, I felt more inspired to lead them as an artist and went back the next week in a different frame of mind. On the way there I thought about the joy of singing and how I wanted to project only that to the students who wanted to take part in it. It was a small goal, but I felt it was attainable. I saw the same class as the previous week at the same time of day, and the attention I was given was almost overwhelming. The students who didn't want to listen the week before were participating more than anyone else. It felt amazing. And no circumstance had changed but me—or rather, my awareness of exactly what I was bringing to the classroom as a singer.

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I also discovered something else that day. Although I have my own vocal issues, I realized I was confident about what makes good vocal production and could very easily talk about it. Beth had pointed this fact out to us numerous times, but I had to experience it to believe it. It seemed that all at once I knew what to work on with the students. What was tricky, however, was learning how to quickly diagnose and prescribe to help the students achieve improved vocal production. I found this intimidating at first; I wasn't sure I knew how to listen for problems and fix them. While I am adept at picking out small details, in order to be effective in this classroom I saw I would need to develop a different thought process; that is, I now had to look at the big picture in order to diagnose. If I could look at breathing, the attack on the sound and the position of the articulators, then perhaps I would be able to detect a pattern in what the young singer was doing.

I noted in my journal several times that this felt to me like flexing a new muscle. I was used to looking at pieces of the puzzle that together make up the total singer, but only from inside of myself. Now suddenly I had to try to see that broader picture from without. At first I found this took a lot of effort, and by the end of one class I was feeling fatigued. But when I started getting the hang of using this new "muscle," I could hear patterns in individuals and in

the group as well. For example, one student didn't open her jaw at all when she sang, and so she wasn't putting enough space into her mouth. But she also had a breathy sound, so even when I got her to open her mouth a bit and make some space, she had a thin sound. After listening to more girls of the same age range (14-15 years old), I found the majority had a breathiness in their sound. I asked Beth about this, and she agreed, explaining that most girls that age will have a breathy sound due to an underdeveloped vocal mechanism. I learned that I couldn't fix it, but could help their breathing so the sound would be supported and would have something to grow into.

When the first year was over, I was able to reflect on what the internship had done for me. I feel that I am now applying to my own singing the concepts I taught at the school. I am able to relate diction, expression, and sound production more efficiently to one another. I am also better at recognizing patterns in myself as well, looking at the broad picture and then focusing on the details. In short, becoming a teacher and a serious scholar of the voice made me an even better artist, simply because, as I learned, those other roles are a vital part of one's artistry.

The biggest difference between my first year in the internship and the second was the school placement. I left Long Island

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City and Frank Sinatra High School, and found myself at Louis Brandeis High School in Manhattan. This was no mere geographical change of locations. Brandeis is comprised largely of students who do not want to be in school at all, some of whom have been there for more than four years; in many if not most cases, the students are putting forth the bare minimum of effort to graduate. Thus, a key difference was the amount of time the students have to or want to put into music. At present, it is required that New York City students take only one semester of music education in their four years of high school. Since most of them are taking the course merely to pass, classroom management became an even stronger, more present issue. If I thought the chatty teenagers at Sinatra were intimidating, the students at Brandeis proved even more of a challenge.

Although this time I entered the internship feeling that I was better equipped to multi-task teaching, demonstrating, and managing behavior, nonetheless I found it was intimidating to stand up in front of students who were bigger than me, closer to my age, and who had very little (if any) connection to classical music or musical theater. We spent much of our time talking about the pieces they were singing, chosen for them by Metropolitan Opera Guild "Urban Voices" program teacher, Ronnie Oliver, or talking about basic music concepts: notation, reading in basic clefs, etc. "Miss, I don't like this," was heard at least once a visit, if not multiple times. There were at any given moment two classroom teachers—Nevena, our coordinator, and another teacher who shared the

room—to help discipline the students. Also, security guards stood nearby in the hallway, and the principal herself came in regularly—with her own personal security guard. The amount of help available for classroom management was both helpful and distracting. The students were continually pushing the envelope, making any kind of teaching difficult. On the other hand, they did get into a few pieces, like "Seasons of Love" from the Broadway musical *Rent*. This became a sort of theme song for the class, and a reward at the end of a class during which we had worked on something else. But we made the most progress on "Seasons of Love." They were able to take comments on diction and apply them, and fairly quickly.

Almost by accident, I found one thing at which the class across the board excelled and enjoyed: rhythm. In time, the students were enjoying at least the one song, and putting up with more than I ever would have thought at the beginning—all hidden inside of these rhythm exercises and games. I wasn't able to use my diagnosis and correction "muscle" as often as I would have liked, but I was in fact developing a new muscle. I was learning to develop more appropriate expectations and to appreciate even small steps taken toward meeting them. That isn't to say that there weren't days where I felt we crashed and burned, because there were. It was a struggle to get the majority of the room to participate in the process of making music, but it did happen; and to see their faces while we tapped out rhythms was priceless—a clear, simple step in the right direction.

At the very end of our time at Brandeis, the students were invited to sing at an inner-city school concert at Riverbank State Park. Fourteen of the fifty or so students enrolled chose to go on the trip and sing. We were to have two soloists sing, and then the choir would sing their favorite, "Seasons of Love." There was genuine excitement among these performers. Unfortunately after our two soloists got to sing, the choir was informed that due to an error on the part of those managing the concert, we had run out of time and would not get to sing. The disappointment was overwhelming to all of us. However, I saw one positive thing emerge. These were the same students who, at the beginning of the semester, wanted only to pass the class and didn't care to learn what we were there to teach. They had spent that day truly looking forward to sharing this music with the audience, and the dejection on their faces, and in their language, was apparent. I was touched that they had come as far as they had, and just as upset as they were that they didn't get to hear the applause they deserved. ¶

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**SIDEBAR**

*Informal Report on Guided Intern Outcomes at the Mannes College of Music*

BY JOEL LESTER

There is much good news to report about the Metropolitan Opera Guild guided intern program in which Mannes College of Music participates. Both the Mannes interns as well as the high-school students with whom they worked in 2004 achieved clear measures of success:

- Three of the high-school students that Mannes interns worked with in 2004 were accepted into the competitive NYSSMA-All State Chorus, and a fourth high-school student was accepted as an alternate. Five high-school students were accepted into the Collegiate Chorale (one of the finest amateur choruses in New York City).
- Most of the former Mannes interns who have graduated are now teaching part-time or full-time in public and private schools in the New York City area.
- Two of the former Mannes interns were hired by the Metropolitan Opera Guild for the 2004-05 Urban Voice

Program. One of those former interns served her internship in Brandeis High School. After her first day there two years ago, she said "I couldn't live through another day there," but now thanks to the internship program she loves doing this sort of work to earn her living.

- Two other former Mannes interns are working in other Metropolitan Opera Guild programs: one is working in "Creating Original Opera," and the other is now the coordinator of the internship program itself.
  - No Mannes student has ever declined an offer to join the internship program. And every single student who was eligible for a second year of the internship program signed up for that second year.
  - Beth Roberts (the Mannes voice-faculty member who has taught the pedagogy classes in the internship program) taught voice in a teacher-training program run by the NYC Board of Education this past summer. Ms. Roberts discussed the Metropolitan Opera Guild internship program, and was besieged by requests for information as to how the teachers could get interns to come to their schools.
  - Ms. Roberts also related a wonderful anecdote. On one occasion last season, the Mannes interns were detained for a few minutes at the Security Desk at Brandeis High School and were therefore late for their class. When they arrived in the class, the Brandeis students were so delighted to see them that a spontaneous round of applause filled the room.
- Various improvements to the program in 2004-05 (which places 10 Mannes interns into three high schools: Brandeis, Bryant, and Frank Sinatra):
- We added a choral-conducting component to the pedagogy class that the interns take.
  - We will create an "end-of-the-year concert," a joint recital performed by the Mannes interns and selected students from the participating high schools. ¶

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