

Mentoring and *Parenting*

a Young Classical Singer

BY KATHRYN COWDRICK

A university professor and parent of a recent high school graduate now studying voice in college shares with parents and students her advice, learned while wearing both hats of mom and teacher.



Kathryn Cowdrick
and son Mathew

This past year my husband Robert Swensen and I found ourselves in a rather unique position. As professors at Eastman School of Music, we were recruiting for our school—teaching and adjudicating prospective students and being interviewed by them and their parents. At the same time, we were also the teachers and parents of a young tenor who was negotiating the college search himself.

Through this process it occurred to me that some of my experiences might be of help to others. Here are some thoughts for parents and our beloved young classical singers.

Begin the Journey

Before you even leave the privacy of your own home, begin to investigate prospective schools. School websites provide an enormous amount of information. They can give you a broad overview of the music program and what it has to offer. High school music teachers can also be wonderful mentors,

perhaps putting you in touch with former students currently majoring in music that can provide you with additional information to aid in your school search.

During the high school years, consider visiting college campuses during family vacations. While this may seem too early to start the search, it will give you a feel for where a singer wants to be geographically and what kind of campus is appealing—an urban campus, a large university, or a small liberal arts school with a strong music program. Many conservatories are part of a larger university community that provides opportunities for additional course work or a double major. Additionally, some schools have arts leadership programs or majors in education and music therapy.

While visiting, talk to the students who give tours and ask lots of questions about their experiences at the school. Parents, don't be surprised if your classical singer hates that you are asking so many questions and walks ahead of you on the tours, as if you do not exist! The critical

move towards independence has begun!

You might consider visiting a school during a performance week. By attending recitals or productions, you will begin to see what types of performance opportunities schools provide.

Building a Foundation

During high school, keep up with your academics. You will put a lot of energy into your lessons and performing, but colleges will also look at your GPA as a reflection on how you work. Take music theory courses. Freshman singers always tell me they regret not having been more dedicated to their piano lessons. It is such a valuable skill for learning repertoire. High school acting or dance classes can also be great preparation for opera workshop performance classes in college.

Take high school language study seriously because it will provide more linguistic security for future repertoire. I recommend one or more years studying French or German in high school.

Italian will no doubt be the first language studied in college. Search for college programs that have strong language classes—ideally each language should have two full semesters of grammar and diction study.

Practice Important Singer Life Skills

Encourage and embrace independence and the development of needed life skills *before* leaving for college. Learn how to iron a dress shirt, do laundry (parental eye rolling), and sew on a button! If you win a scholarship or earn money, start a savings account. Our son contributed to his college fund, but also put money aside for a summer musical/language program to attend in the future. When he got to college, he was surprised to learn how much he would spend living in a large city. Learning to budget and balance a checking account is important.

While in high school and college, you don't need a website, but it would benefit

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you to learn how to develop one. Your generation is very technically savvy, and you should put those skills to good use.

Musicians always need part-time work. Employers appreciate good writing skills, promptness, and organization. We had our son write and then continue to update his résumé. We also had him buy a date book to enter in rehearsals and daily schedules. Directors and conductors appreciate promptness, flexibility, and memorized music with beautiful diction all prepared by the first day of rehearsals.

While on Campus

When families visit our school, I am happy to meet with both students and parents for sample lessons or to speak to them about our program. Every school will have their own protocol for this. Faculty members routinely get requests for meetings with too little notice. I always appreciate at least two weeks. Faculty will rarely be able to meet individually with students on audition days, but most schools should offer group meetings for candidates and parents. Please do not expect all sample voice lessons to be given for free, and don't underestimate

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how much thank you notes are appreciated. Many teachers may also be happy to speak with you or answer further questions via phone or e-mail.

Before visiting a school, make a list of the questions you want to ask the faculty and admissions department. It is so much easier to start an interview with a teacher you're meeting for the first time with your list in hand. Voice teachers can help you develop questions to ask voice faculty about their program, their vocal philosophy, and course work.

Too often, I have seen a young singer come into such an interview who barely makes eye contact, does not shake hands, or remains mute while the parent takes over the interview. This is not an impressive start. In the future, singers will be a part of many fundraising events and recitals. Having confidence and an ease in communication with an audience is paramount.

I encouraged my son to keep a journal of each college visit. He wrote school information and his feelings after each visit or lesson while it was fresh in his mind. He could then revisit this journal later on in the decision process.

Start brainstorming about admissions essays and make sure you have reserved plenty of time to make quality recordings

for the initial screening process. Read all directions carefully before applying. Be thorough and proofread. Don't undermine an application with poor spelling or missing information.

Finding a Teacher

Choosing a teacher for college study is important. This is the person who will guide you on your musical journey for the next four years. Consider taking an informational lesson or observing other students' lessons. A "good" voice lesson is one that allows the student to learn about their strengths in addition to the specific technical things that they will need to address.

Once you have settled on potential teachers, let those teachers know that you would like to be considered for their studio. If you have no clear teacher preference, no request is needed. This can also work in your favor. The faculty will match you up with someone they feel you are best suited for—perhaps someone who is very anxious to work with you!

Some teachers still are active performers. While it is important for a student to gain a sense of independence, a teacher's frequent absence may be of concern to an undergraduate singer. Teachers should provide you a makeup lesson plan and be more than willing to keep in touch while they are out of town.

Getting Down to Brass Tacks

After the auditions, admissions and financial aid decisions are made based on the applicant's audition performance and academic achievement. The present economy and the depletion of endowments have provided a challenge to all schools, and yet most will work with families to provide what they can. Some schools are restricted by state budgets, others are very generous to undergrads, and some simply do not provide much scholarship at all. If your employment or family circumstances change, speak to a representative at financial aid and not the faculty. Call and make an appointment so that they will better be able to address your personal situation.

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Audition Repertoire

When it comes to repertoire, I continually see singers present audition pieces that I believe are inappropriate for young singers. These include challenging Bel Canto arias such as “Caro nome” and Lieder such as Schubert’s “Gretchen am Spinnrade.” Teachers should not feel pressured to have their students audition with difficult repertoire. This often undermines a developing technique and can negatively impact consideration for admission and scholarship. At Eastman, we look for pieces that are age appropriate and show vocal potential. I listen for a quality sound, clear diction, good intonation, musicianship skills and, most importantly, a desire to communicate a love for singing.

Rather than work on only three selected pieces, we had our son create a group of six potential audition songs. He then chose what he would sing closer to the audition date. We found that having a larger pool of repertoire kept the pieces from becoming stale. Be sure to let schools know what the audition repertoire will be by the deadline date and, if requested, send music in promptly.

Visit the *Classical Singer* online archives for more great information on this topic in articles such as “Less Is More—What University Professors Really Think about Your College Audition Program” (September 2011) and “Ten Steps to Selecting a Winning Audition Repertoire” (September 2009).

Waiting It Out

While waiting out the audition year, you can look for and create opportunities to perform your repertoire in recital with other singers or instrumentalists. Planning a project can keep the love of performing alive and reduce some of the anxiety of waiting. My son and a friend (a classical guitarist) used their audition repertoire to create a benefit concert for a local hospice, giving them an opportunity to collaborate on additional repertoire.

Learning to Sing Is a Journey, Not a Race

Those words hang on the door of my studio. The teaching of the undergraduate voice requires meticulous, technical care. Progress is often made slowly, and undergraduate singers often show the most growth toward the end of the junior year. The expertise for singing comes over time as the intrinsic muscles of the larynx are guided by regular practice and cognitive development.

For me, the most important part of the body for singing might be the brain. A teacher’s goal is not only to nurture the voice, but to also teach students how to become independent in their work. One of my freshmen last year said to me that after all the frenzy of college application and auditioning, his biggest challenge in actually starting college came in the form of how to learn to slow down, be patient, and just do the work.

FEEDING A CREATIVE BRAIN

What else should a high school singer consider? Here’s a quick bullet list of ideas for further musical and mental preparations:

- **Participate each year in NATS** (National Association of Teachers of Singing) or state competitions run by music educators because it is a chance to have an audition experience and receive feedback.
- **Learn about the vocal mechanism** by reading about pedagogy. A suggestion for high school students might be Meribeth Bunch Dayme’s book, *The Performer’s Voice*. Consider attending summer programs that cater to high school age singers. Be aware, however, that many programs serve the more advanced singer, so it is far better to save money to attend one of these in the future.
- **Post on social media judiciously**—that includes putting only quality performances online via YouTube.
- **Listen to, enjoy, and embrace all types of music!** Jazz greats like Ella Fitzgerald have so much to teach about phrasing and expression of text, and young singers today are more adept than ever at merging musical traditions with new creativity.
- **Learn poetry.** Poetry and performance go hand in hand.
- **Volunteer backstage or at an after school program** where others can enjoy your talent. Do lots of choir singing, participate in community theater, or be a camp counselor.
- **Listen to great classical singers of the past** online—our art form has historic traditions. So many great moments of musical inspiration can also be found here!
- **Continue to attend live or HD opera performances** to see the craft at work. Singers should search for what makes successful singers unique as performers.

Kathryn Cowdrick



Since my husband and I are in the business, we know what issues impact a performer's life. Many parents reading this may not be musicians, and this world will be confusing. You may feel a bit lost. Take heart in the fact that a musical child is training his brain, learning to think outside the box, and following her passion!

Academic challenges can be huge for many students during the first semester. If a student has had testing that reveals a disability and/or has an Individualized Education Program (IEP), it is wise to report this to the new school. Parents and

students hesitate to do this and that can be a critical mistake. Most schools will have support available.

The Three Most Difficult Challenges I Have Seen for Freshman

1. Understanding the importance of learning time management. Making a schedule (when to eat and practice, or how to plan out long term projects) may seem ridiculous, but for some students, it can help them feel more in control, efficient, and successful.

2. Learning how to practice healthfully and efficiently. Create an organized binder that contains copied music, translations, and dividers for each song type. We had our son write out his warm up routine and vocal exercises and keep that sheet in the binder, adding exercises when new challenges came up. Have your teacher help you develop this protocol.

The great vocal teacher Manuel García said, "It is only by learning the secret of practicing that there is any possibility of learning to sing well."

Maximize practice room time by combining vocal work, piano practice, and theory homework. This builds vocal rest into productive learning so that the voice will not be overworked.

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3. Developing patience with the vocal journey. Patience does not mean a lack of ambition—you have to learn to be a self-starter! You need to learn to keep your sense of self strong during times of self-doubt. The high school and college years can sometimes present great personal challenges. Stay healthy with yoga, exercise, or meditation. Your school should offer counseling if needed for support. It is confidential and may help you find strength, manage challenges, and find your own “voice.”

Keeping Perspective

Like most singers, you probably dream of a performance career. You may discover, however, that you are not vocally strong enough to achieve that goal, or that your true interests lie elsewhere. The path of your musical life may draw you into music therapy or music education where every day will give you a chance to inspire and perform.

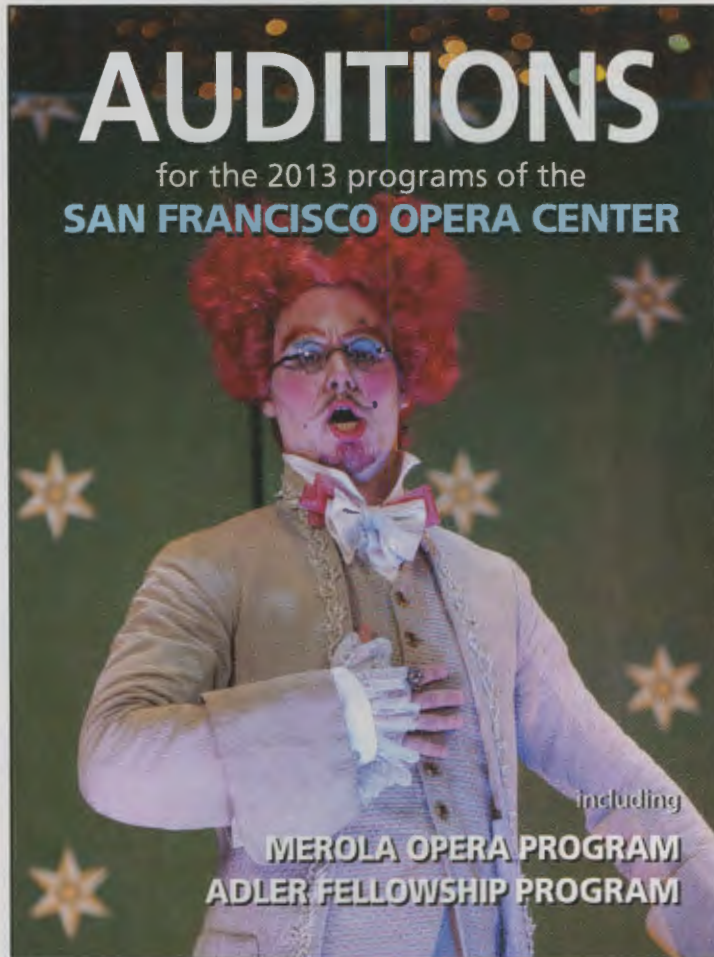
Our school has educated musicians that have won Grammy Awards and gone on to great acclaim. Others chose to use their musical training as professional choristers or as a springboard into arts leadership, teaching, medicine, and law. Not surprisingly, our university’s medical school provides an opportunity each year for physicians to perform in recital.

Not being accepted into a specific school or program of study is a disappointment, but when one door closes, a window will soon open. You can take lessons and continue your musical life no matter what your major. Eastman’s doctoral students teach secondary lessons to many fine singers who are majoring at the University of Rochester in the sciences, business, and liberal arts.

We all want guarantees. However, the only truth seems to be that we will never know where a life in music will take us. This noble profession of being a musician has existed for thousands of

years. You can be assured that whichever musical road you choose to follow, you will find that a life with music, to paraphrase what Luciano Pavarotti once said, will be “a life beautifully spent.”

Kathryn Cowdrick celebrates her 30th anniversary as a performer by appearing as Despina (Così fan tutte) at Opera Saratoga, Marcellina (Le nozze di Figaro) for Fort Worth Opera, Halitiere (Cendrillon) for Kentucky Opera and Suzuki (Madama Butterfly) for Sugar Creek Festival and Opera Southwest. Trained as a speech pathologist, she began her career as an Adler Fellow with San Francisco Opera. She teaches voice and vocal pedagogy at Eastman. She frequently presents seminars in vocal health and performance pedagogy for universities and YAPs. Visit her online at www.kathryncowdrick.com. ©



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