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Exploring Adjunct Teaching, Part 1

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INTRODUCTION

Working as an independent studio teacher is not what many would consider to be a typical job. It often occurs during evening or weekend hours, outside the traditional 9 to 5 work week. Many teachers hold additional jobs in the music field as performers, music directors for theaters or churches, or voice teachers in schools. As explored by D. Brian Lee in a previous "The Independent Teacher" column, a significant number of voice teachers also have nonvoice-related jobs (NVRJs) that feed their other interests and abilities and provide additional financial security.[1]

Another way that many independent studio teachers find work is as adjunct voice teachers in colleges and universities. Like any job, these teaching positions come with advantages and disadvantages. One advantage of adjunct teaching is having a clientele that is provided by an institution, which may help lessen the burden of recruiting students to an independent voice studio. College students often can be scheduled in the morning or early afternoon hours, when many other voice clients are unavailable due to school or work schedules. Adjunct work also may allow opportunity to teach classes in diction or song literature or to direct an opera workshop, which may complement independent studio work. An adjunct teaching load may include instructing students who are music majors, which can provide variety for teachers whose private studios often are primarily made up of avocational singers. Some teachers may enjoy particularly the freedom that part time, adjunct teaching allows, especially if they have other work or family obligations that limit the time and energy they can invest in their independent studios.

Adjunct work can have some disadvantages as well, many of which have become notorious. The work can be sporadic and inconsistent from semester to semester. Adjunct teachers traditionally have little job security from year to year and often do not know until after a semester begins to what degree their services will be needed—if they are needed at all. Teachers sometimes split time between multiple campuses, which can be separated by long distances, and they frequently teach in shared spaces that can be difficult to schedule. Adjunct teachers often have a capped teaching load that prevents them from qualifying for employer sponsored benefits such as health insurance. Compensation can be paltry when compared to their independent studio

rates, and paychecks may arrive only once or twice per semester. Adjunct teachers often are expected to carry out additional duties for which there is no additional compensation—leading master classes, attending area meetings, and participating in vocal juries. And, although they are part of an academic faculty, adjunct teachers rarely have voting privileges on institutional or departmental matters.

To explore these concerns, the next two "The Independent Teacher" columns are dedicated to issues related to adjunct teaching. In this installment, I begin by examining adjunct teaching across academia, I then discuss whether part time adjunct work is a necessary step for those looking to secure full time university level teaching positions. To conclude, I will review the varied rates of pay at which adjunct voice teachers are compensated.

THE TREND TOWARD CONTINGENT FACULTY

For a number of years, a movement has been underway in academia to get more work from adjunct labor. According to the American Association of University Professors, the percentage of contingent faculty (nontenured or nontenure track) has grown from 55% in 1975 to 73% in 2016.[2] The irony of this phenomenon is that, when searching the word "adjunct" on Dictionary.com, the first definition listed is, "Something added to another thing but not essential to it."[3] Therefore, the title of "adjunct" would seem to be a misnomer, considering it would be difficult to describe 73% of an institution's teaching workforce as "not essential."

The reasons for this trend have been discussed at length in academic publications and via mainstream media outlets. In *The New York Times*, for instance, Colby College professor of sociology Neil Gross outlines three reasons why universities have begun relying so heavily on adjunct instructors: "First, it's much cheaper for colleges and universities. Second, American graduate schools award an enormous number of PhDs, even in disciplines in which jobs are scarce. Graduates who can't find tenure-track positions may take adjunct employment rather than give up on the academic dream."[4] The third factor he discusses relates to political forces that have long fought against the tenure system. Gross believes these forces have gained traction over the years and have gradually contributed to the decline of tenure track positions.

The Cost of Adjunct Labor

To Gross's first point, it is cheaper for colleges and universities to hire adjunct labor that is paid on a per course or per credit hour basis than to have that work done by full time, tenure track professors. Since adjunct positions often do not come with the same contractual expectations as tenure track positions (serving on committees, curriculum development, recruiting, research and creative activities, etc.), contracts are set up to compensate teachers only for the time they spend teaching. When adjunct positions are kept at a part time level, institutions often are not obligated to include benefits such as health insurance, further reducing institutional overhead.

The realities of adjunct teaching are satirized in a *Medium* article that introduces Adjunct Barbie™ as "a part-time college instructor who's almost, but not quite, ready to give up on her dreams."[5] The fictional new toy encourages young girls to "imagine everything they *might* become" while offering "a glimpse of what they're more *likely* to become." Adjunct Barbie™ teaches eight classes each semester, peruses *The Chronicle of Higher Education* to guess which positions have already been promised to internal candidates, and comes with a fully customizable diploma with a PhD available in hundreds of poorly funded fields.[6]

A more sobering side of adjunct teaching was tragically revealed in 2013 after the heart attack death of long time Duquesne University adjunct professor Margaret Mary Vojtko. After 25 years of teaching French as a part time professor, Vojtko learned that Duquesne was not going to renew her contract. She had been earning about $10,000 a year and had incurred high medical bills for cancer treatments since she did not have health insurance.[7] According to reports, Vojtko had taken a second job at a fast food restaurant and was sleeping in her office.[8] Although Duquesne did hold meetings with union officials associated with the United Steelworkers, the university ultimately refused to allow their adjunct professors to unionize, which would have given them a platform to lobby for better compensation. This sparked fierce discussion about fair pay for contingent

faculty and led to widespread commiseration from other adjunct faculty under the hashtag #iammargaretmary.[9]

Terminal Degrees

To Gross's second point, the number of doctoral degrees awarded in all fields over the decades has been steadily increasing. According to The Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED), sponsored by the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics (NCSES), in 1958 there were 8,773 doctorates awarded by accredited U.S. institutions.[10] By 2017, that number had exploded to 54,664. In 1987, the SED began breaking down degrees by major field of study and found that doctorates awarded in "humanities and arts" increased from 3,478 to 5,290 in the 30 years between 1987 and 2017. Doctorates in music were not specifically singled out, but likely would be included in the "other humanities and arts" category, which excludes degrees in foreign languages and literature, history, and letters. These "other" doctorates increased from 1,504 to 2,135 over that same time period.

Although some voice teachers earn PhD degrees, the most common terminal degree among those who teach singing is the Doctor of Musical Arts (DMA) or Doctor of Music (DM) in voice performance. According to the degree descriptions on the websites of some of the more prominent DMA/DM granting institutions in voice, the training focuses on developing extraordinary performance skills, instilling a broad range of knowledge in the field, and establishing an ability to engage in high level scholarship. Some programs specifically state that the degree is designed to prepare students for academic careers. The proliferation of voice teachers earning DMAs, however, has not coincided with the availability of voice teaching jobs in academia. As a result, more people have DMAs in voice than there are available positions for which a DMA is required. Of course, the skills, knowledge, and capabilities that are developed while earning a doctorate can be valuable outside of postsecondary educational settings.

New School history professor Claire B. Potter sparked strong reactions when she shared Gross's article on Facebook, along with her own comments: "Why won't anyone say the obvious: no one should work as an adjunct. If people refused this labor and did something else with their PhDs—which, according to studies done by professional associations is more than viable—institutions would be forced to adjust their hiring practices."[11] After swift backlash to her comments, Potter defended her position in an article for *Inside Higher Ed*, stating, "no one should be ashamed of not getting—or not wanting—a tenure-stream job."[12] She goes on to explain that humanities degrees can prepare students for a variety of jobs outside academia or even outside their primary field. As proof, she tells how alumni from her own history department with master's or doctoral degrees have found success and satisfaction in jobs within finance, public relations, psychotherapy, high school teaching, local historical societies, textbook publishing, business, information technology, politics, international relations, national security, journalism, and poetry. Therefore, she believes we can help remedy the problem of underpaid adjunct labor "by all of us agreeing not to insist that the only successful graduate students are those who only commit to one definition of success—and one location for pursuing their intellectual dreams."[13]

Warren Hoffman shares similar ideas in his *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, "Can You Have a Rewarding Intellectual Life Outside Academe?"[14] Instead of pursuing a university teaching job after completing his own graduate degrees, Hoffman found work as a literary manager of a major U.S. regional theater. After working in this job for a time, a tenured professor confessed to him over coffee, "You have an awesome job—you know that, right? I'm jealous."[15] This comment prompted Hoffman to ask, "Why is getting a tenure-track job still seen as the only way to lead a fulfilling life of inquiry in the humanities?" Reflecting on his "unexpected" career path, Hoffman muses, "I never abandoned the activities of teaching, research, writing, and thinking critically. While academe is a place where ostensibly all of those actions coalesce, it's not the only place where they exist. With some creativity and flexibility, each element can be interwoven with a life outside of a college campus."[16]

A BRIDGE TO THE UNIVERSITY

For those who do decide to pursue tenure track teaching jobs, is experience as an adjunct teacher a necessary first step? Is a certain number of years spent "in the trenches" as an adjunct instructor required before teachers can be considered qualified for full time positions?

Author Herb Childress addresses these questions in *The Adjunct Underclass: How America's Colleges Betrayed Their Faculty, Their Students, and Their Mission*. In the book, he references the idea of "hope labor," a term coined by communication researchers Kathleen Kuehn and Thomas Corrigan. Many musicians are all too familiar with the concept, defined as "un- or under-compensated work carried out in the present, often for experience or exposure, in the hope that future employment opportunities may follow."[17] Childress believes many adjunct faculty invest in "hope labor" with the conviction that their dedication, tireless work, and excellent teaching will eventually be recognized and rewarded in the form of a more permanent, full time, perhaps even tenure track position. As he states, however, "Conversion of an adjunct faculty position into a fully absorbed tenure track career is mathematically so unlikely as to be meaningless, just like fan fiction becoming a best-seller."[18] He acknowledges that "once in a rare while" adjunct positions are converted into full time, nontenure track positions, although he cynically refers to these few instances as "the shills" that keep the rest of us at the table "betting against ridiculous odds."[19] Often, an unspoken belief exists that simply getting a "foot in the door" at a college or university is all a teacher needs in order to eventually land full time work. Childress responds to this notion, saying, "You get your foot slammed in enough doors, you'll never walk right again."[20]

To answer the question of whether adjunct work serves as a bridge to full time work in a way that is more specific to voice teachers, I looked back at more than a year's worth of postings on the Job Center at NATS.org (from October 2018 to October 2019). During this time, 19 postings advertised tenure track voice teaching positions. Of these, 13 required—or gave preference to—applicants who had college level (or young artist level) teaching experience. One of those positions would accept "significant private teaching" experience in lieu of college level teaching. Three additional postings required teaching experience but did not specify what kind. Curiously, two positions did not specifically ask for teaching experience at all, and a third posting merely asked for "a commitment" to quality education. Finally, one posting asked for two years of performing and/or teaching experience.

Based on these postings, college level teaching does not seem to be an absolute requirement in order for candidates to be considered for a tenure track position, although teachers may have more options if their résumés include at least a couple of years of experience in this realm.

It is also interesting to note that 18 of the 19 tenure track postings indicated either a requirement or preference that candidates have a terminal degree (one position did not list a specific degree requirement). Four of those positions would accept applications from candidates with a master's degree and significant professional experience. One position required applicants to hold a terminal degree (ABD considered), but did not list previous teaching experience of any kind among the requirements. Thus, the absence of a terminal degree would seem more likely to disqualify applicants from consideration for a tenure track position than a lack of college level teaching experience.

However, many colleges and universities do offer full time teaching positions that are not tenure track. Again, if we are considering the official definition of the word "adjunct," it would seem impossible for something to be both full time and adjunct. Therefore, in the performing arts, many of these teaching positions come with titles like artist in residence, performing artist, lecturer, visiting artist, visiting professor, professor of the practice, professional specialist, or career line professor. There also have been various designations in which "adjunct" indicates a position's impermanency rather than part time status. These positions can be designated as adjunct instructor, adjunct lecturer, adjunct assistant professor, adjunct assistant teaching professor, or the more general title of adjunct faculty.

Do these nontenure track positions require college level teaching experience and/or a terminal degree? Returning to the NATS Job Center, one finds that over the previous year there were 15 postings for full time, nontenure track voice teaching positions. Fourteen of those positions required previous teaching experience with 11 of them requiring or preferring that experience to be at the college level.

Unlike the tenure track positions, only three of these postings required a terminal degree. Two others listed a terminal degree as preferred but not required, while two others asked for either a terminal degree or signifi-

cant professional experience. Therefore, based on these postings, those without college teaching experience or a terminal degree may have more options when applying for full time, nontenure track positions as opposed to tenure track positions. But, as with tenure track positions, applicants with both college level teaching experience as well as a terminal degree may have more options.

The NATS Job Center did also list two part time, nontenure track positions over the last year. Both required applicants to have a master's degree and teaching experience, with one specifying a preference for candidates with a terminal degree and college level teaching experience.

COMPENSATION

The rate at which adjunct faculty are paid can vary widely from institution to institution. One teacher I spoke with teaches voice lessons at a small college for $55 per hour. This wage reflects only the teacher's contact time with students and does not include any compensation for prep time, office hours, leading master classes, attending voice juries, etc. Another adjunct instructor at a large state university earns approximately $47 per hour for teaching voice lessons, which again considers only the contact time with students.

In a previous column, Michelle Markwart Deveaux found the average independent teacher charges anywhere from $50 to $250 per hour, while the small business connection website Thumbtack lists the average cost of one hour voice lessons at $50 to $60.[21] This is despite Deveaux's assertion that, over the years, "the cost of voice lessons has not risen proportionally to other costs of living."[22]

In October 2019, a question was posted to the members of the private Facebook group "Professional Voice Teachers" regarding hourly rate of pay for adjunct voice teachers. Of the 27 members who responded with specific numbers, the rates ranged from $30 to $125 per hour with the average being $54.63. The top three hourly wages came from New York City ($80-$125), San Francisco ($70–90), and Cleveland ($60-$90). When those three cities are removed, the average hourly wage drops to $50.73. Several people on the thread commented that their wages as adjunct voice teachers were significantly lower than the rates they charge in their independent studios.

For adjunct musicians who teach university classes, historian Erin Bartram created a resource that allows adjunct teachers to anonymously share information about their positions, including the name and location of the institution, highest degree of the instructor, department, and rate of pay per three credit course.[23] As of this writing, Bartram's spreadsheet titled "Academia salaries" had 28 entries under the "Adjuncts 2019–2020" tab that list "Music" or "Performing Arts-Music" as their department. The salary range for those entries was from $2,000 to $7,500 per three credit class, with the average being $3,993. Of those 28 faculty members, 82% possess a terminal degree (23 of 28) and only 32% of their employing institutions (9 of 28) have a union that includes the adjunct faculty.

CONCLUSION

As seen above, adjunct teaching positions can have significant differences in terms of rate of pay, status as part time versus full time, or even availability from semester to semester. If independent teachers' work as adjunct faculty is truly "adjunct," in that it is "added to" but not "essential to" their financial success and security, they may be in a better position to enjoy the advantages the positions provide without becoming dependent on work that, more often than not, tends to be lower paying and less consistently available than that of many private voice studios.

In part two of this article, which will appear in the May/June 2020 issue of the *Journal of Singing*, I will present perspectives of several teachers who currently work as adjunct faculty at various colleges and universities across the United States. Although their personal experiences will naturally vary, the views of these teachers will provide a "boots on the ground" picture of what current adjunct work entails.

Not every independent teacher is interested in teaching in a college or university setting. For those who are, however, understanding the realities of modern adjunct teaching can provide essential background when considering such positions.

NOTES

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19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Michelle Markwart Deveaux, "Battling Pricing Pitfalls: Pricing Strategy for Today's Studio Owner," *Journal of Singing* 75, no. 4 (March/April 2019): 456.
22. Ibid.
23. Hakim Bishara, "Adjunct Professors Share Salaries and Working Conditions in a New Spreadsheet," *Hyperallergic*, September 4, 2019; https://hyperallergic.com/515973/adjunct-salaries-spreadsheet/?fbclid=IwAR3nJHwOMwHngvDs4L_foMcdJW3qkbzOymxqweBfcdb_G_u3N__-JoFXAI4.

My soul is an enchanted boat,
Which, like a sleeping swan, doth float
Upon the silver waves of thy sweet singing;
And thine doth like an angel sit
Beside a helm conducting it,
Whilst all the winds with melody are ringing.
It seems to float ever, forever,
Upon that many-winding river,
Between mountains, woods, abysses,
A paradise of wildernesses!
Till, like one in slumber bound,
Borne to the ocean, I float down, around,
Into a sea profound, of ever-spreading sound.

Meanwhile thy spirit lifts its pinions
In music's most serene dominions;
Catching the winds that fan that happy heaven.
And we sail on, away, afar,
Without a course, without a star,
But by the instinct of sweet music driven;
Till through Elysian garden islets
By the most beautiful of pilots,
Where never mortal pinnace glided,
The boat of my desire is guided;
Realms where the air we breathe is love,
Which in the winds on the waves doth move,
Harmonizing this earth with what we feel above.

"To a Singer," Percy Bysshe Shelly