

Brian Manternach, Associate Editor

Choose Your Own Adventure

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“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.

Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*¹

WHEN I WAS GROWING UP, I would read every *Choose Your Own Adventure* book I could get my hands on. For those unfamiliar with the series, its readers are presented with predicaments throughout each book and must decide how the stories will progress. In an outdoor adventure, for example, participants may be asked to turn to page 46 if they would like to explore a nearby cave, or to page 53 to take a winding path through a jungle instead.

As a child, I appreciated how the books would allow me to make decisions for myself and how the next adventure—though unknown to me—would always be one of my own choosing. I also had the safety of knowing that when I reached the end of the story, I could go back in the book and make the opposite decisions to see how those different choices would play out.

Forging a career as a voice teacher is often like reading a *Choose Your Own Adventure* book. As we are presented with options that will determine our paths forward, we make choices that seem most likely to help us reach our end goals. We may have idealistic motivations, like a passion for music, a love of teaching, and a deep belief that singing is a positive force in the world, but we must choose how best to put these motivations into practice.

We have to decide what clientele fits our skills, personalities, and interests. We have to decide how to generate sufficient income through our work to sustain a career. And we have to decide how to establish an ideal balance between our work lives and personal lives.

Without the benefit of jumping ahead in the book to see how certain decisions will ultimately impact our stories, we can still find satisfaction in knowing that the career choices we make are entirely our own and that we ourselves are the biggest determining factors in our future success.

That being said, we generally do not have to look far to find those who are willing to question or second-guess the decisions we make for our careers. Perhaps some people feel threatened or judged when our choices do not align with theirs; or, perhaps it is human nature to “armchair quarterback” those around us. As evidence, I can recall two specific instances when my professional choices were questioned by people who—despite not knowing me well—had clear ideas about what I should be doing with my life.

The first case occurred several years ago when I was on an interview trip for a nontenure track university voice instructor position. The chair of the

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music department served as my guide for the day, escorting me to each meeting and chauffeuring me across campus (enthusiastically noting at one point, “There’s the football stadium where our band plays!”). As the day progressed and the requisite questions from all parties had been asked and answered, the conversation became more relaxed—and more frank.

While we were discussing community involvement and recruiting, he was stressing to me the importance of establishing good ties with the local high school music teachers and independent voice teachers. He emphasized the need to foster those relationships, but was careful to add that a certain distance must be maintained, as well. “You can’t be drinking buddies with them,” he said. Lest I misinterpret his meaning, he went on to explain that I should not get too “chummy” with teachers outside the university walls because they need to look to those of us in higher education as the true experts. “Let’s be honest,” he said, “most of them really wish they were doing what we do here.”

These comments made quite an impression on me, although I was decidedly unimpressed. From this professor’s perspective, anyone teaching outside of a university setting must do so because they lack the abilities or knowledge to get hired within the university system. He seemed not to fathom the idea that, as professionals, teachers might choose (and even *prefer*) to work in an independent studio or to specialize in developing singers during the age ranges that fall outside those of traditional college students. I have encountered others in higher education who seemed to share that condescending opinion, but few had stated it so plainly and unabashedly.

At the time these comments were made, my full time day job was as a high school music teacher (choirs, music theater, and music theory). Based on income, my secondary job was as an independent voice teacher. My work as an adjunct university voice instructor was only my third job. Therefore, it was difficult not to see these comments as a direct assessment of my choices as well as the choices of high school and independent teachers everywhere. Perhaps he felt we were of the same opinion because, during the interview, I was highlighting my university teaching. But that was because I felt that work was most *pertinent*, not most *important*.

A second example of questioned career choices also occurred several years ago during a rehearsal break with a regional opera company. The cast was made up of local singers who were primarily making their income as independent voice teachers, adjunct college instructors, and regional performers. In getting to know each other, we were discussing where we had all gone to school. I mentioned that I was in the last throes of my doctoral studies in voice performance, to which one of the cast members responded, “Why would anyone want to get a doctorate? What a waste of time and money!”

Of course, the question was framed as a hypothetical—designed more to express an opinion rather than seek an answer. But I decided to respond anyway. I related that, before I started my degree, I had been performing and teaching for several years and was looking for a way to take both skills to a higher level. I wanted to immerse myself in vocal music, learn from outstanding mentors, and become part of a community of peers that would inspire and challenge me. I was fortunate to have found all of that in my doctoral studies.

I also stated that I do *not* believe a doctorate is the only way to achieve those goals, nor do I believe it is the path everyone should take. My cast mate was correct in that the degree did take a considerable investment of time, energy, and resources, but I believed then, and still believe now, that it was the right choice for me. As such, I do not consider that the investment was a waste of my time or money. More so, I would never disparage anyone’s choice to earn a degree by dismissively referring to it as a “waste” or “just a piece of paper.”

As professionals who aspire to excellence, we have to choose the paths we believe are best for each of us. To assume that the experience of earning a doctoral degree is worthless for everyone is just as absurd as assuming that every voice teacher secretly aspires to teach in a college or university.

Thankfully, in my experience, such opinions (and the brashness to proclaim them without invitation) are increasingly in the minority. Most of the university teachers I know have great respect for the work of high school teachers and independent studio teachers. And most voice teachers I know are perfectly capable of doing a cost-benefit analysis for themselves to see if doctoral studies would be a worthwhile pursuit based on their life and career goals.

Like me, several of my childhood friends also enjoyed reading the *Choose Your Own Adventure* books. Sometimes we would compare notes as to which decisions they made in the stories. Instead of turning left at the waterfall, like I did, some of them turned right; where I chose to hike across a mountain range, some of them chose to paddle a canoe down a river. Our comparisons were spurred by genuine curiosity about our friends' adventures. It never occurred to us that our experiences or enjoyment reading the books could in any way be devalued simply because someone else chose a different story.

As Jean-Paul Sartre noted, "We are our choices."² The paths we choose as teachers of singing—while uniquely

our own—stand to benefit the lives of our students and clients in many different ways. As we choose our own adventures, I hope we can both support and honor the decisions of those who engage in this profession in ways other than the ones we choose for ourselves.

NOTES

1. Lewis Carroll, Quotes; <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/225938-would-you-tell-me-please-which-way-i-ought-to> (accessed December 31, 2018).
2. Jean-Paul Sartre, Quotes; <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/52381-we-are-our-choices> (accessed December 31, 2018).



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