



BY BRIAN MANTERNACH

With so much uncertainty, artists should continue to set realistic goals, hoping that the foundations they lay will lead toward a greater result.

Often in my life when I have been overwhelmed or feeling aimless, I have read and reread this reflection by Ken Untener (frequently attributed to Óscar Romero) called “Prophets of a Future Not Our Own”:

“We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord’s grace to enter and do the rest.”

I find that by acknowledging that I *can’t* do everything, I am freed from the responsibility of *trying* to do everything. This also comes with the reminder that of the things I *am* able to do, I don’t have to do all of them right now. I can focus on one thing at a time and do that to the best of my ability.

This applies well to the voice studio since I teach one student at a time, each of whom requires guidance and instruction that is individualized. I can’t give my students everything they need, and I am aware that what I am able to offer them is often incomplete. But it can be a step along the way, which can lead to another step, which may lead to yet another step. Maybe that’s just Newton’s first law of motion at work (an object in motion stays in motion) or maybe it’s something akin to grace.

This was the impetus behind the first assignment I gave to my students once we made the shift to online lessons due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I said, “Given the current circumstances, what are two or three vocal goals you can work on for the rest of the semester? Maybe your goals from the beginning of the semester will still apply or

maybe you will need to adjust based on how things have changed over the last two weeks. Regardless, be as specific as you can in outlining what you’d still like to accomplish and what steps you can take to help you reach those goals.”

Faced with a new normal, I knew that it may not be realistic to try to adhere to the same goals they set at the start of the semester. I also know, however, that in order to “do something and do it very well,” we have to first identify what that “something” is.

Even so, Untener offers this caveat in an earlier section of “Prophets of a Future Not Our Own”:

“No set of goals and objectives includes everything.”

So, even when we identify the “something” we intend to do very well, it’s likely that even those efforts will be incomplete. I’m choosing to view that as liberating, as well. Untener’s reflection continues:

“This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.”

The image of seeds growing is so familiar in education as to have become cliché. But we can tie that image into the stages of motor learning, as outlined in “Stages of Learning and How It Affects Your Singing Progression” at [csmusic.net](http://csmusic.net).<sup>2</sup> In some of our skills, we are just planting seeds. In other skills, we are nurturing small, budding plants. In other skills, we are harvesting fruit. We can’t get fruit from seeds we have just planted, but we can water

those seeds, give them sunshine, and keep the weeds at bay so that they have the best possible chance to reach full growth.

Untener's reflection concludes:


"We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own."

Although we may aspire to be master builders in our craft, the best artists I know still consider themselves to be workers, reaching toward greater "end results" that they may or may not ever reach. That future is not their own since they can't dictate what the ultimate results of their efforts will be. All they can do is continue to lay foundations that they know will need further development.

In another sense, we build our voices so that our songs can be released into the world. We can never know the full impact they will have, how they will be received, or how they will be remembered. All we can do is infuse our singing with the greatest skill and greatest intentions we can manage and hope that it will reach people in meaningful ways.

We are living in a time when "reaching people" is increasingly difficult and yet vitally important. In this global pandemic, too many lives have been lost, questions linger about the future that no one can reliably answer, and our "normal" has been permanently altered. While life is weighed down by these concerns and we feel the ache of isolation, we rely even more on tools of connection, especially those that artists provide.

We can't do everything. But we can do something. It will be incomplete, and we may never see the end results of our work. But it will be a step along the way, planting seeds for a future not our own.

*Brian Manternach's bio can be found on page 66.* 

### Endnotes

1. Ken Untener, "Prophets of a Future Not Our Own," [www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/prayers-and-devotions/prayers/prophets-of-a-future-not-our-own.cfm](http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/prayers-and-devotions/prayers/prophets-of-a-future-not-our-own.cfm) (accessed April 16, 2020).
2. Brian Manternach, "Stages of Learning and How It Affects Your Singing Progression," [www.csmusic.net/content/articles/stages-of-learning-and-how-it-affects-your-singing-progression/](http://www.csmusic.net/content/articles/stages-of-learning-and-how-it-affects-your-singing-progression/) (accessed April 16, 2020).

# MEAD WITTER SCHOOL OF MUSIC



UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN - MADISON

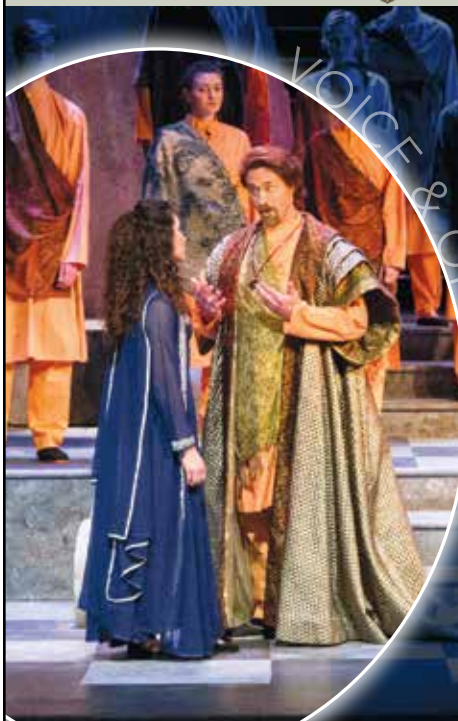


Photo courtesy of Michael R. Anderson

- Award-winning opera program - *The American Prize and National Opera Association*
- Brand New Hamel Music Center Opening Fall 2019
- Numerous Scholarships, Awards, Assistantships, and Fellowships available
- Two full opera productions with orchestra each year
- Opera Scenes, Oratorios, Chamber Music, World Premieres
- Many double major opportunities
- Alums singing in major opera houses worldwide – see list on webpage

#### DEGREE PROGRAMS:

B.A./B.S./B.M./M.M./D.M.A  
in Vocal Performance

B.M./M.Ed in Music Education

#### VOICE & OPERA FACULTY:

James Doing, *Voice*

Mimmi Fulmer, *Voice and Opera*

Thomas Kasdorf, *Opera Coach*

David Ronis, *Karen K. Bishop Director of Opera*

Julia Rottmayer, *Voice*

Paul Rowe, *Voice*



For further information, please check: [www.music.wisc.edu/voice/](http://www.music.wisc.edu/voice/)