

# The Singer's Library

## Singing through Change

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH

A new publication is a must-read for women who sing as well as the voice teachers and medical professionals who work with these women.

In recent years, several books have been written to address concerns related to the aging voice. Those wishing to enjoy singing over the course of a lifetime need information specific to the years that fall outside of the supposed vocal prime. Therefore, a new book—*Singing through Change: Women's Voices in Midlife, Menopause, and Beyond*—identifies an even narrower but often neglected time of life that may bring vocal uncertainty.

In this interview, authors Nancy Bos, Joanne Bozeman, and Cate Frazier-Neely discuss their own midlife vocal journeys, what is important to know about how women's voices may change during these years, and why this topic deserves to be explored in greater detail.

**As the authors of *Singing through Change*, you all bring significant yet varied backgrounds as voice professionals to the book. Similarly, you all had different experiences and challenges with your own voices as you approached midlife. Would you say one of the key takeaways of the book is that there is no universal experience (physically, mentally, emotionally, or vocally) for women as they go through menopause?**

**Cate Frazier-Neely:** Yes. We also want to say up front that roughly half of women who move through the menopausal transition have no or very few voice issues.

About 20 percent of women report no physical symptoms at all!

We don't want to create a "nocebo" affect where cisgender women anticipate trouble. Our mission is to let the rest of the millions of women who sing know that if they experience troubling vocal issues, they aren't making it up. We want them to understand that their singing issues could be the result of hormonal changes and the physio-socio-psychological results of those hormone changes.

**Joanne Bozeman:** Being aware won't cause problems to happen, but awareness will steer women in the right direction if voice concerns of any kind show up. Midlife female singers deserve much more than to be left silently wondering if their voices seem to be changing.

**You cite startling statistics that, compared to men, women's illnesses are often more slowly diagnosed and have historically been blamed on psychological**



Brian Manternach

**weakness. You also point out the paucity of research on the impacts of menopause on the singing voice. What do you believe to be the primary ramifications of these inequities?**

**JB:** The ramifications in the general medical field are broad, and there are excellent sources available for those who want to know more about these issues. As for why research on the female singing voice is needed: speaking and singing are produced by the same mechanism, but singing puts specialized demands on the instrument, including range, flexibility, sostenuto, resonance and, in some genres, volume. Speaking voice studies tend not to investigate in ways that realistically relate to the demands of singing, so results make it appear that effects of menopause are minor. And we lack research giving us a filled-out picture of the singing voice through the menopausal transition, which takes place, typically, over 5 to 10 years.

**How can we advocate for a more just and equitable focus of attention and resources?**

**Nancy Bos:** Improving the future for all women who sing requires support and nonjudgmental understanding from everyone who surrounds them. We all know that the human body goes through changes, so when we find someone feeling down about their voice, it is an

opportunity to bolster and support them as they seek solutions rather than accept self-blame. By advocating for one singer at a time, we will make the shift; it will be demanded.

**CF-N:** Overall, we all need to get the word out. We need to speak to each other, to our health care providers, doctors, and families. Colleagues, friends, family, and teachers need to accept that often vocal challenges are not always the result of “improper technique” or “it must be in her head.”



Nancy Bos

**For voice teachers who work with or aspire to work with “women’s voices in midlife, menopause, and beyond,” what are some of the first, most important elements to understand about this population of singers?**

**NB:** Perimenopause, which encompasses the years before full menopause, can be either a very vocally challenging or vocally rewarding time for women. If a

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Metropolitan Opera;  
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woman experiences confounding changes to her voice, the first question should be “Is this related to perimenopausal or menopausal shifts due to estrogen or progesterone fluctuations?” The second question regarding female students of all ages should be “Has this woman’s voice and body gone through changes that require us to reevaluate her technique and repertoire for this new instrument?”



Joanne Bozeman

**JB:** Female singers may find themselves in a midlife “soup” of pressures such as caring for both children and elderly parents, financial problems, emotional stress from work, even new health issues. These women have a lot on their plates! If voice difficulties happen, finding a supportive, creative teacher is central to finding the way through vocally rough waters as well as the emotions that accompany them. We believe that there is no one-size-fits-all set of exercises that will work for all women representing a variety of singing genres. *Singing through Change* will help teachers understand the broader context of the menopausal transition, including effects on voice, and allow them to be better equipped to help the particular singer in front of them.

**Rather than simply stating facts, figures, and statistics, you include the stories of dozens of women who have experienced varying degrees of physical and vocal changes during midlife. Why was it important for you to include these voices?**



Cate Frazier-Neely

**JB:** Stories put flesh on the bones of statistics. They convey the beginning, middle, and end of vocal journeys in midlife. Our interviewees’ compelling stories—their *voices*—showed us the book that we needed to write. We hope that readers will find themselves or aspects of themselves in the narratives, find some comfort if they need it, ideas for seeking help, and a greater understanding of their remarkable bodies and voices.

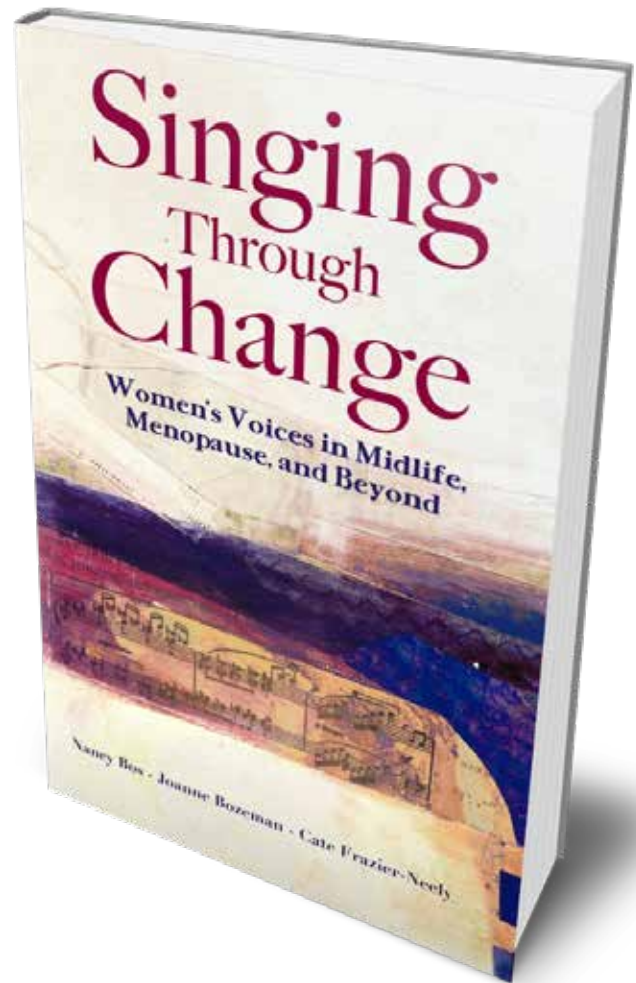
**You state in the introduction that you set out to write “the book we wish we’d had 20 years ago.” How do you believe your own experiences in midlife would have been different if you had known then what you know now?**

**CF-N:** I would’ve understood that I was post menopause by age 42 when my children were 6 and 10! I would’ve understood that it isn’t unusual to have menopausal symptoms in the years after menopause. I would’ve known where to find help for my thyroid issues, considerable weight gain, and hormonal rages that affected close relationships. . . . Honestly, my list could go on!

**JB:** As for me, when I was experiencing voice issues in perimenopause, a leading laryngologist told me that my symptoms were due to neuromuscular changes from lowering estrogen levels. Though hearing this didn’t fix my voice, it was a profound relief to learn that I had not simply become a poor singer! Even though I was well informed about voice health and pedagogy, at that time I had no idea that voice changes could accompany perimenopause. There is no doubt that *Singing through Change* would have been immensely valuable when I was in my late 40s. It would have been a shortcut to the information and reassurance I needed!

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## Book Review

The title of the new book *Singing through Change: Women's Voices in Midlife, Menopause, and Beyond* implies a specifically targeted readership. Naturally, women who are experiencing the physical—and potentially vocal—changes that can occur during the hormonal shifts of perimenopause and menopause may find relatable information in the book to help them negotiate their voices during these periods of transition. Women of all ages, however, stand to benefit from *Singing through Change* as well. Considering that the onset of perimenopause can happen much earlier than midlife, younger women who inform themselves of the common vocal changes that come with aging will be better prepared to navigate their evolving voices as the years pass. At the same time, women who have reached the other side of menopause may find validation if they experienced any of the physical changes or accompanying emotional distress that are discussed by the multitudes of women interviewed for the book. This may be especially true if they navigated these changes on their own.

Besides the singers themselves, voice professionals who work with women will also benefit from reading *Singing through Change*. Authors Nancy Bos, Joanne Bozeman, and Cate Frazier-Neely present information specific to this population of singers that will help voice professionals serve their clientele with greater understanding and compassion. This may include those who work in artistic capacities (singing voice teachers, acting voice teachers, music directors, choir directors, etc.) as well as those who work in clinical settings (speech-language pathologists, singing voice specialists, laryngologists, etc.).

The authors state in the introduction that *Singing through Change* “is meant to encourage and educate women worldwide who love to sing; to provide a reliable, readable resource; and to let them know they are not alone.” The lack of attention this topic has thus far received highlights a larger problem that needs to be addressed. In the meantime, Bos, Bozeman, and Frazier-Neely have done their parts to ensure that if women experience unsettling vocal changes in midlife, they do not need to suffer in solitude or silence. —*Brian Manternach*