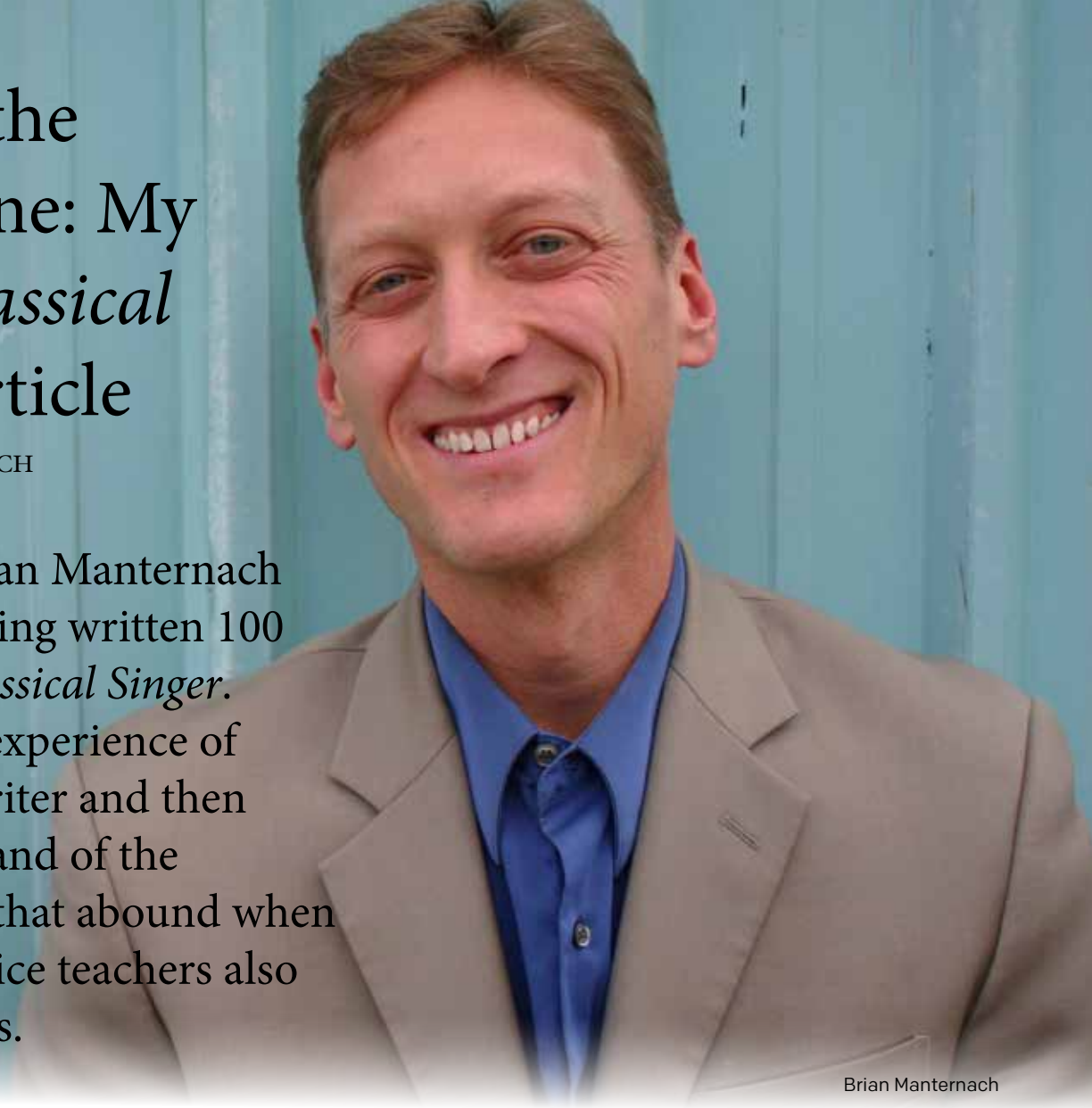


Striking the Write Tone: My 100th *Classical Singer* Article

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH

Columnist Brian Manternach reflects on having written 100 articles for *Classical Singer*. He shares his experience of becoming a writer and then a columnist—and of the opportunities that abound when singers and voice teachers also become writers.



Brian Manternach

In 2006, I had an idea that inspired me to do something I hadn't done before: write.

I was a graduate student at the time, and one of my professors said something in class that made an impression on me. He had compared the process of building a career in the arts to living through a prolonged adolescence. He was specifically noting the tendency for artists to pursue advanced degrees and then work low-paying jobs while honing their skills and pursuing opportunities. This can cause many of us to not quite feel like full-fledged adults, especially when comparing ourselves to those who earn bachelor's degrees in fields where consistent and lucrative employment is more of a guarantee after graduation.

As that comparison rolled around in my brain, I started to think back to my adolescent teen years. I could certainly see the professor's point and could notice some of what he was describing in my own journey. Then I started to make additional connections. Many of the primary memories I have of adolescence involve simply trying to avoid ridicule. This was particularly prominent during middle school—a time of life I doubt many of us would willingly repeat.

Being at a particularly awkward stage, one in which the opinions of peers can be extremely influencing, I was often driven by the desire to avoid any and all negative attention. This resulted in many safe choices that allowed me to stay within my comfort zone. From there, I could freely explore things I was already good at and recognized for while avoiding anything that might open me up to failure—especially if that failure were to be noticed by any of my classmates. This all caused me to consider whether a similar fear of failure had influenced my early adult life as a preprofessional musician.

So, I decided to explore the idea in writing, even though it wasn't connected to a school assignment (a first for me, I believe). Of all the academic skills I have practiced during my extended time in school, writing is something I had always appreciated and, dare I say, enjoyed. But I was never the type to just sit down and write out my thoughts. I had never dabbled with writing poetry or short stories, never imagined myself writing the great American novel, and I'd never even kept a journal or diary. Even so, on one of my typical late nights on the top floor of the William and

Gayle Cook Music Library at Indiana University, I decided to type up a draft.

I'm still not certain why I felt moved to do it. I guess I imagined someone reading it who may have had similar experiences. Maybe that person could relate to what I felt and even take comfort in, or be inspired by, my reflections and perspectives.

After lots of revising, and after seeking feedback from a few family members, I worked up the courage to share the article with my voice pedagogy professor, Paul Kiesgen. I wanted his advice on whether he felt it was worthy of submitting somewhere for publication. I recounted his reaction in an article I later wrote after Professor Kiesgen's death. "Without hesitation he boomed in his large bass voice, "Of course!" When I remained unconvinced due to my student status and relative lack of credentials, he retorted with a laugh, "Who do you think writes these articles? It's people like you, so you might as well beat them to it!"

With his encouragement, I emailed Sara Thomas, then editor-in-chief of *Classical Singer*. I had never met Sara, but I had been a faithful subscriber to the magazine ever since it was introduced to me when I was an undergraduate student about 10 years earlier. I had kept stacks of back issues on my shelves, even when I lived in small apartments where space was at a premium. I also had folders full of articles I had torn out, highlighted, and kept for future

reference. It was a little intimidating to write to its editor out of the blue and suggest that I, an inexperienced writer, could contribute something that may appeal to the large, international audience of *Classical Singer*.

I explained in the email to Sara that I didn't know if she accepted unsolicited articles but that I was attaching an essay with the hope that she may consider it for publication in the magazine. She was incredibly gracious in her reply, saying that she enjoyed the piece and, though she didn't know exactly when she would have a spot for it, she would be happy to include the essay in an upcoming issue. My article "Adolescence Again?" ran in the October 2006 issue and is still accessible in the archives on the CS website.

I have now written more than 100 articles that have been published between the print edition of *Classical Singer* and the CSmusic.net website, a benchmark I never would have imagined reaching when I first sat down at the keyboard with a partly formed idea based on an offhand comment made by a professor. This benchmark has got me reminiscing a bit about the value of pursuing ideas. It also reminds me that, as artists, we can never know the significance of opportunities when they first come up.

In the years since that first published piece, I began to write more and more frequently for the magazine. Sometimes I would submit finished essays for consideration, other times I would propose ideas that I was interested in writing about, and still other times Sara would



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Brian Manternach, NATS-
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send me a topic and ask if it was something I would like to pursue.

My first cover article was in 2010—a feature on Dolora Zajick and the students and faculty at the Institute for Young Dramatic Voices. Since then, I have had the opportunity to interview singers I have admired ever since I first became interested in opera, namely Stephanie Blythe, Dawn Upshaw, Neil Shicoff, and Samuel Ramey (who almost blew out the speaker on my cell phone with his resonant bass voice). I've also interviewed some of my current favorites, like Joyce DiDonato, Isabel Leonard, Ryan Speedo Green, and Broadway star Elizabeth Stanley. I even had the opportunity to interview my former Indiana University classmate Jamie Barton in 2013 after she won the BBC Cardiff Singer of the World competition. This was a particularly gratifying article to write since, besides reconnecting with Jamie, I also got to interview my former IU professors Mary Ann Hart and Brian Horne.

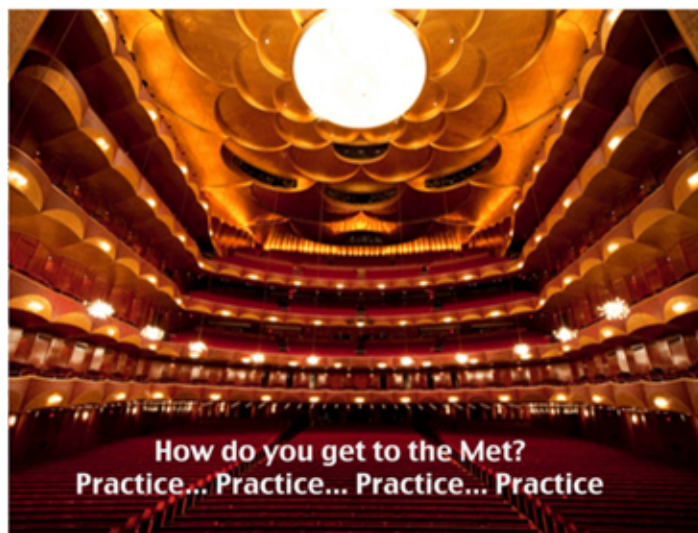
In 2014, I reached out to Sara again to see what she would think about adding a book review column to the magazine. I even had a name ready: "The Singer's Library" (perhaps fitting, since my first CS article was written in a library). My motivation at the time was partly a selfish one, as I wanted access to the newest books and information in the field. I also wanted the chance to talk with authors about their work, mostly to ask the burning questions I had and also just to get to know these great minds. Although I initially thought it would be a "once in a while" column, the more books I received, the more I realized how many



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Brian Manternach performing Handel's *The Messiah* with the Westminster Orchestra



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tremendous resources were coming out that deserved to be highlighted. I decided to get reading and make it a regular column appearing in each issue, which has led to the review of more than 70 books. For those wondering—yes, I do read every book cover to cover (though I will admit that I don't always read through every term in every glossary).

A colleague of mine contacted me once for advice because he had been asked to write a book review for a different publication. He said that he enjoys reading "The Singer's Library" but said it seems like I love every single book that I read. Tongue-in-cheek, he asked if that was really true or if it was just a ruse. The truth is, I don't enjoy every book I am sent. I just don't write about the ones I don't like. From the beginning, I wanted the column to serve as a vehicle for promoting work that I feel deserves to be featured, rather than a place to tear down an author's honest efforts. Just because a book doesn't speak to me doesn't mean others shouldn't give it a chance. Of course, space limitations also sometimes prevent me from featuring some books, meaning I have to set priorities and make difficult choices once in a while.

Since that first submission in 2006, writing has become a form of expression and artistry for me that now rivals—if not exceeds, at times—my singing. Certainly, since the onset of the pandemic, I have published significantly more than I have performed. Some of that is due to availability of opportunities, but it's also due to what feels like a natural shifting in my interests as I get deeper into mid-life.

I also believe that exploring creativity in one medium can benefit creativity in all other outlets. I am certain that carefully choosing how to construct a phrase in writing has made me more effective at explaining concepts or techniques in the classroom and voice studio. I know that the attention I give to the intention behind what I write, and considering how my words may be perceived by readers, causes me to analyze song texts more thoroughly and through a wider lens. I am convinced that the more avenues we have for exercising all of our "creativity muscles," the more we bring to our vocal art.

Sometimes, when I'm working toward an impending writing deadline, especially if I have more than one article due, I catch a refrain from *Hamilton* running through my head: "Why do you write like you're running out of time?" True, my magazine musings are not exactly *The Federalist Papers* that were eating up all of Alexander Hamilton's free minutes. But I recognize the pressure that comes with due dates, which means creativity sometimes has to be summoned even when I am not feeling particularly creative.

I also relate to the follow-up question to Hamilton, "How do you write like you need it to survive?" Do I need to write to survive? No. But I need to be creative. And I need to create in a way that makes me feel connected to other human beings—the whole reason, in my opinion, that the creative arts exist.

Whether this is the first article of mine you have picked up or you've been a faithful follower for 15+ years, I sincerely thank you for reading. I am grateful to Sara for giving me that first opportunity and I am indebted to my in-house copy editor—my wife, Erika—who brings clarity to my writing, my thoughts, and my life.

On to the next 100.

If you are a singer who writes, please reach out to our editor, Joanie Brittingham, who accepts pitches from new voices in the classical singing community.

Brian Manternach, DM, is an assistant professor at the University of Utah Department of Theatre and a research associate at the Utah Center for Vocology. He is an associate editor of the Journal of Singing and his research, reviews, articles, and essays have appeared in numerous voice-related publications. brianmanternach.com / drbrianmanternach.blogspot.com / bmantern@gmail.com

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Endnotes:

- (I) Brian Manternach, "Paul Kiesgen, In Memoriam: Lessons on Listening," *Classical Singer*, June 1, 2011; www.csmusic.net/content/articles/in-memoriam/.
- (II) Brian Manternach, "Adolescence Again?" *Classical Singer* (October 2006): 64-66.



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