

TAKE CHARGE!

The newsletter of The Business of Singing
November 2004 Volume I, no. 2

WELCOME!

Happy Thanksgiving, everyone. In the spirit of the season, the theme of this month's issue is "Inspiration, Generosity, and Momentum".

Articles:

- A Blessing on Your Head
- Organize Now for Tax Season!
- The Kindness of Strangers: Buying into Your Vision

Regular Features:

- Idea of the Month: Bless someone with music
- November Challenge: Are pay-to-sings worth it?
- When's the last time?
- News
- Calendar
- Parting Thought

+++++

When you learn, teach. When you get, give.

~ Maya Angelou

+++++

A BLESSING ON YOUR HEAD!

By Cindy Sadler

Television preachers, as a rule, are not a source of inspiration to me. But recently one morning in a faraway hotel room, having turned on the TV for background noise to mask the loudness of my warmups, something a televangelist said caught my ear.

He was speaking about how parents talk to their children, how they have an incredible power to bless or curse their children's future. "When you say to your child, 'you're stupid, you'll never amount to anything, you can't do anything right'," he said, "you are placing a curse on that child's future. When you constantly criticize and harp on them, you are telling them they aren't good enough. You're withholding your approval. And that curses them."

"But when you tell your children that you love them and you are proud of them --- for no reason at all --- you are blessing their future. You are telling them that they are worth something, and that your love isn't dependent on what they do but on who they are. Bless your children!"

The deep truth of what the televangelist said moved me deeply. Words have a great deal of power, and cutting words seem more powerful than kind ones. We all know singers who have been “damaged” by abusive teachers or who have suffered the wrath of temperamental conductors and directors --- authority figures upon whom singers often depend for advice, feedback, and indeed, work. Is there any singer who has never been “cursed” by such an authority figure, who doesn’t have the hurtful words burned into their very soul?

The nature of our business is such that it attracts passionate and sometimes troubled souls, some of whom vent their anger and frustration and hatefulness on others who are not in a position to strike back. When we are criticized in a hateful way from an authority, the words carry much the same weight as critical words from parents and other loved ones. These words can become a curse to us, imbedding deeply in our psyches and poisoning us from within.

“You don’t have what it takes to be a professional singer.”

“Why can’t you get that right? You’re such a terrible musician.”

“You just don’t have the high notes.”

These curses, if we buy into them, can follow us throughout our careers and affect our chances at success. The good news is, we don’t have to buy into them. We can release ourselves from the curse. We can bless ourselves. And we can bless others.

When I was a young singer in an apprenticeship program, I was standing in the hallway at intermission of a performance, chatting with the mainstage artists with whom I was performing. Our notoriously temperamental conductor came out of his dressing room with a red gleam in his eye. His performance wasn’t going well and he was looking for a victim upon whom he could vent his rage. I watched as he scanned the hallway and settled on me --- the only apprentice among four principal artists --- and began to berate me for a late entrance. His voice escalated louder and louder as he attacked and humiliated me in front of my colleagues. Many years later, that conductor’s words are still branded into my brain. As I type these words, my cheeks are flushed red and my heart is beating faster.

I might have been devastated by his tirade, but for three things. One was that I knew he was wrong --- my entrance had been perfect. The second was that I had seen him do this to others, and was as prepared as I could be for my turn. But also, even while this man was screaming at me, I felt love. While I was being attacked, my seasoned colleagues slowly closed ranks behind me. One of the men actually stepped a little in front of me, as if to shield me. The soprano (now a star) moved up beside me, put her arm around me, and squeezed my hand. Like most bullies, the conductor soon realized that I was not alone, and concluded rather quickly. The minute he stomped off, my colleagues surrounded me and assured me that I had not been at all late on that entrance, and that the conductor was just picking on me because I was low man on the totem pole. Their

kindness ameliorated what could have been a much more painful episode and helped turn aside the “curse” that might have taken root in the soul of a young and vulnerable singer.

This, too, the televangelist said. He spoke about the power each of us possessed to turn aside the curses heaped on us by unloving authority figures. We can free ourselves from these curses by the simple act of declaring our freedom from them, and asking for release. Whether you ask God, the universe, or your own wounded psyche, the acts of asking for and declaring freedom are powerful. Some people even find that rituals, such as writing the criticisms down on paper and then burning it, solemnize the event and provide closure.

We can also invite blessings into our lives. The televangelist ended his remarkable sermon with an eloquent prayer invoking blessings. He called down blessings, goodness, and happiness into the lives of his congregation members. “Bless us going out and coming in,” he prayed.

We can speak blessings for ourselves. I invite you to create your own blessing, to repeat to yourself when you need to be reminded of your wonderfulness, your unique talent, your worthiness of goodness, love, and your art. And I’d like to share my own with you:

I invite blessings, goodness, and happiness to take up residence in my life, that I may bless others.

Bless me when I sing and when I am silent.

Bless me when I study and when I teach.

Bless me when I give and when I take.

Bless me going out and coming in.

Bless me with the strength and heart to do my part to continue an ever-widening circle of generosity, caring, and genuine good will until it embraces every being on the planet.

Amen.

#####

Idea of the month: Bless someone with your music!

Call the activities director of a local nursing home or assisted living facility and offer the residents an hour of Sunday afternoon at the opera. Take your boombox and some of those silly, fun karaoke opera and Broadway CDs. Dress up like a diva or divo, and just have fun. Try out your new audition repertoire. Practice for your upcoming recital. Stretch dramatically --- if there were ever a place to try out new things and go over the top, this is it!

The residents and staff will be appreciative, and you can ask to leave a stack of cards or brochures advertising your services for weddings, funerals, corporate events, recitals, voice lessons, etc. Be sure to ask the activities director if they have a budget for entertainment and whether she can refer you to other nursing homes or assisted living facilities. Tell her that you like to offer an occasional free sample, but you are also available for hire. The people who live in these homes have families who may need your

services! If they hear Aunt Velma rave about your performance, who knows ... you just might get a wedding or Christmas party gig out of it. But even if no financial gains result, you will get a healthy dose of artistic and spiritual satisfaction.

++++
"It is good for us to think that no grace or blessing is truly ours till we are aware that God has blessed some one else with it through us."

~ Phillips Brooks, (1835-1893) American Episcopal minister

++++
The Kindness of Strangers: Buying into Your Vision
by Ed Robinson

"I've always depended on the kindness of strangers" -- Blanche DuBois, from Tennessee Williams' play A Streetcar Named Desire.

A little good luck can provide a welcomed assist for any endeavor including the business of singing. We know good luck happens. We've all heard stories of seemingly miraculous kindness provided in the nick of time to someone we know. But do you feel a little nutty depending on a stranger's kindness to advance your vocal career? And is generosity a totally random event like winning the lottery or is there something about the dynamics of generosity that is worth knowing? Without denying there are many kind and selfless people who freely help others, I suspect we ourselves set the conditions for some of the kindnesses that happen around us.

Throughout my business career I've observed that people are drawn to worthy causes, ideas and individuals. In my corporation we call this attraction 'buying into the vision'. Creating a 'vision' for ourselves not only focuses our energies, it also draws people to our cause. People, including some we may barely know, will often identify themselves and offer a hand.

Professional singers are really small businesses. Success of small businesses depends on the talent and hard work of their owners but survival also depends on having a good business plan and getting 'buy in' from others. In the world of commerce, successful people know what business they want to be in and, equally important, what business they do not want to be in. They instinctively spread the word about their business capabilities, what differentiates them and how their product or service is evolving. (How to communicate this effectively is a topic for another day.) More than just 'networking', creating buy-in for singers means sharing your personal goals and how you plan to accomplish them. Even if you aren't 100% certain how to complete each element of your plan, simply having a plan creates energy around you.

In my case, sharing my singing ambitions with my voice teacher, choirmaster and a few selected musicians has created momentum for myself and resulted in help I hadn't expected. I began by singing just for pleasure. As I gained some proficiency I set a goal of publicly performing an aria from Handel's Messiah and occasionally singing at weddings.

I shared this goal with my choirmaster who helped me identify opportunities to perform. Audience reaction was reasonably good so next I set a goal of recording the pieces I'd been performing. I wanted to produce a limited (make that a very limited!) CD for family and friends. I'd never recorded before and wasn't sure how to proceed but my choirmaster offered the use of our church to make a live recording and my voice teacher helped me set a budget and locate a recording engineer. I was starting to get assistance that I hadn't expected -- people were 'buying-in', offering their resources and contacts that could help my project. My CD was a surprising success. Sure, I expected Mom would like it, but I didn't expect my wife's family to demand extra copies. Their surprise at my singing ability (actually, it was more like amazement) gave me an emotional lift I hadn't expected. I got bold and set a new goal -- holding a recital in February. I've had to get used to this idea and some of my family think it is peculiar, but they weren't sure about my recording a CD either. Besides, my expanding set of musical friends are providing encouragement and thoughtful suggestions. Once again, by having a plan and sharing it I've found people generously offering possible recital locations, free publicity and other kinds of preparation. Of course the responsibility for finalizing and executing my recital plans remains mine alone. Plenty of hard vocal work and project management remains to be done but having a clear objective and working towards it has made it easier for other to help me.

So, who needs to depend on the kindness of strangers like Blanche DuBois did? A good personal plan to advance your musical goals will work much better and you'll be pleasantly surprised how many people will help you achieve what you desire. In other words, if you establish a clear vision and buy into your own plan, you will provide the opportunity for others to do so as well. To quote another well-known film, "If you build it, they will come."

Ed Robinson is a Senior Marketing Specialist with IBM in Austin, Texas. He is a tenor who rediscovered the thrill of singing in mid-life. Ed is active in his church choir and aspires to join the chorus of Austin Lyric Opera. He is married and has two children who aren't quite sure what to think about their father's sudden interest in opera.

+++++

November Challenge: Are pay-to-sings worth it?

'Tis the season of application deadlines, and many clients are asking, "Should I try to do a pay-to-sing program? Is it really worth the money? Will it look bad on my resume?"

I happen to be a fan of pay-to-sings --- as long as it's the right program, for the right person, under the right circumstances. As with anything else, the first thing you should ask yourself is whether doing a pay-to-sing program fits in with your business plan. What do you hope to accomplish by doing the program? Does it support your overall business and artistic goals? And does the program you're considering seem likely to fulfill your needs?

Pay-to-sings can be a great experience. They can offer the opportunity for growth, knowledge, making connections, putting a needed role on a skimpy resume, providing a safe environment in which to learn that role, and giving a singer the tools he or she needs to make it to the next rung on the ladder.

I did a pay-to-sing program every summer I was in college as a music major, and I am convinced that the intensive work I did at each helped me build momentum that propelled me with greater enthusiasm and effectiveness through the school year.

The first program I did was Brevard Music Center. There I did not receive much in the way of instruction, but I did perform four fully staged and costumed operas and two Broadway shows with orchestra, as well as numerous concerts and opera scenes, in seven weeks. I also sang my first-ever opera role: Azucena. It was a marvelous experience and set me up for a dynamic school year.

The next summer I followed my teacher to a now-defunct program in North Carolina called Musician's Club of America. We did a great deal of study with incredible instructors such as Joan Dornemann, Mignon Dunn, John Norris, Nico Castel, Janet Bookspan, Sherrill Milnes, and many others. There were no fully staged productions but we did numerous concerts and scenes programs. Again, I returned to my school inspired and eager to capitalize on my technical advances.

The last pay-to-sing I did was International Institute of Vocal Arts. The work I did there made it possible for me to give a terrific audition for the Lyric Opera of Chicago Center for American Artists, and I was invited to join. From that experience my professional career was launched.

As a result of my personal experience, I believe that pay-to-sing programs are not only good for college-aged singers, but really quite essential. They allow the singer to be immersed in intensive study without the distractions of grades and home. They encourage risk-taking, exploration, and growth. If nothing else, they give a young singer the chance to stand up and perform in front of people --- for better or for worse --- quite a lot. Serious young singers cannot afford to take the summer off from study, and pay-to-sings provide a great opportunity to make technical leaps and gain valuable experience that can only enhance university or conservatory studies.

But what about singers who are past their college years? Are pay-to-sings valuable experiences for them? I believe they can be --- within reason. They can provide additional training and performance experience that the singer may not be able to achieve on his own. They can be a way to learn a role really well before attempting it in a professional situation. They can help a singer keep her finger in the performance pie when she's not getting paid work. They can provide networking opportunities.

I often advise clients who are not getting paid work, who are re-entering the opera world, or who have changed fachs and have nothing on their resumes reflecting their new repertoire to do a reputable pay-to-sing program just to get something on their resume and

to get some experience. However, it's true that a long list of pay-to-sing programs on a resume that lacks professional experience doesn't do you any favors. You begin to look like a professional dilettante rather than a legitimate, hireable singer.

One solution is to list the roles you've learned at pay-to-sings but never performed professionally as Roles in Repertoire. Another is to do the program and get the experience, but leave it off your resume entirely. Whatever you decide to do, carefully evaluate whether the program truly represents a step towards achieving a career or artistic goal; if it's a substitute for real work; or even a stalling technique to help you avoid facing an issue in your singing life.

Finally, pay-to-sing programs must be scrupulously researched. Unfortunately, there are many which are badly disorganized or downright fraudulent. Talk to singers who have participated and ask whether they received what they were promised and whether they thought the program was worth the money. Find out the scoop on advertised teachers and big name participants before you go --- how long will they be there, in what capacity, and will everyone have access to them? How many voice lessons and coachings will you receive? How many master classes will you sing in? Are roles multiple cast, and if so, how many performances are you guaranteed? Get everything in writing.

Is a pay-to-sing worthwhile for you? Do your homework as a businessperson and a good consumer, and the answer will become apparent.

+++++

When's the last time you ... updated your Christmas card list to include the business contacts you made this year? Consider creating an inexpensive postcard listing your season accomplishments as well as season greetings to send to fans, managers, opera companies, and concert venues.

+++++

ORGANIZE NOW FOR TAX SEASON!

by Anna K. Cox-Havron

Do you want to make next tax season painless, organizationally speaking? Do you want to spend March and April loafing in the park, instead of muttering your way through stacks of coffee-stained receipts and Post-it notes?

I met a C.P.A. for coffee and naturally, the conversation turned to filing. No, wait, come back!

Actually we were talking about human nature, as it relates to filing. She was telling me about how different her clients are, when it comes to tax season. Some of her clients bring her a printout of a one or two page spreadsheet listing their income and expenses

for the year. Others bring her shoeboxes in April overflowing with uncategorized receipts. She made no judgments about either client; the only thing she said was that she regretted that clients who brought their shoeboxes in April weren't getting their money's worth from her.

Anyone can plug numbers into a tax-return, she said. What she loves to do is advise small business owners on their financial strategies. She's inspired by the daring they take on, to pursue their dreams. She gets inspired by the vision, commitment, and yes, risk-taking of her small business clients (we can include professional singers in the small business category). And what she loves to do, is apply all the insights she can to help them profit.

This was a lightbulb moment for me, in our conversation. Her passion is to help her clients pursue their passions, with less risk.

Same passion! Less risk! I don't know about you, but I haven't felt that kind of win-win frisson since dark chocolate was declared to have medicinal purposes!

When it comes to money, my C.P.A. friend has creative (yet totally legal!) ideas which allow her clients to keep more of what they earn. She is also able to provide benchmarks. With the market research she gets from her firm, she can tell her clients if they're spending more or less than their professional colleagues in certain areas. She can also help them figure out which strategies and expenditures are really paying off.

Some of her clients, she said, have no interest whatsoever in sorting their receipts into neat little categories. "That's fine," she said. "We have paraprofessionals at the firm who cost less than me, who can go through a box of receipts." And if she gets the shoebox in NOVEMBER, she added, she has time to find out what's in those receipts, so she can then give her clients the real benefits of her extensive financial training and analytical skills. If she gets the piles of receipts in NOVEMBER, she has time to actually think about how to help them grow their businesses.

Part of office organization is filing and categorizing: the art of knowing where your stuff is, so you can get it when you need it. That can certainly apply to tax receipts. But let's face it:

Many of us are number-phobic. Others of us simply have no desire to spend the weekend going through a shoebox of receipts.

Luckily, we can still be organized about our taxes. What organization really is, at its core, is the art of being ready for anything. And what does readiness come down to? Doing certain small tasks, a little bit ahead of time.

So get your taxes organized: Hie your shoebox over, this very week, to your favorite number-cruncher. If you don't want to pay a C.P.A. to go through the shoebox, then have a bookkeeper sort those receipts for you. Anything that comes in between now and December thirty-first will be simple and quick to add, after the big pile is processed.

And then your C.P.A. is free to be your financial genius, so you can better afford to be her artistic genius . . . and you can still pat yourself on the back for being organized for tax time, without ever filing a thing.

Pass the dark chocolate!

Anna K. Cox-Havron is a writer and professional organizer. She is the founder and managing director of The File Factor, LLC, which specializes in goal setting, time management, and office organization for artists and other professionals. She can be reached at AnnaK@thefilefactor.com.

NEWS

Three courses have been added to the lecture offerings at The Business of Singing. Internationally known bass baritone and stage director Edward Crafts may be engaged for any of the following classes:

AUDITIONING, LIVING, AND SINGING IN EUROPE

In this special session, Ed offers singers the benefits of his years of first-hand experience from both sides of the auditioning table and provides many of those hard-to-discover answers for the singer who aspires to a European experience.

AUDITION TECHNIQUES MASTER CLASS

Singers often clamor for hard-to-get feedback from auditions. Ed Crafts offers that feedback via a director's perspective as he addresses every aspect of auditioning other than vocalism: from attire to protocol to physical presentation and the ever-nagging question of appropriate staging.

OPERA ACTING TECHNIQUES OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

A special workshop designed to help singers comprehend the type of acting nineteenth century composers and librettists expected to see from their singers. Specifically addressed is the Delsarte system of acting, including practical exercises and the recreation of some historic stagings of arias. Invaluable and unusual knowledge sure to enhance a singer's performances and understanding of the composer and librettist's intentions.

Ed is also available for one-on-one sessions to advise singers on career strategies.

+++

Private consultations with Cindy Sadler are currently being booked for November 30 – December 4 in New York City. Email info@thebusinessofsinging.com for more information.

+++

Several items have been added to the Resources Page. We are currently working on a special section entitled The Champagne Room, a password-protected area open only to private consultation clients. If you have a request for an article or item, please email info@thebusinessofsinging.com!

+++++

CALENDAR

If you have participated in a seminar or had a private consultation with Cindy and would like to list your performance event on the Calendar, please send your email requests to info@thebusinessofsinging.com. Listings are free and at the discretion of the editor.

Tuesday, November 30 – Saturday, December 4
Private Consultations in New York City
Contact info@thebusinessofsinging.com for more information

March 14 – April 10 2005
Private Consultations in Boston
Contact info@thebusinessofsinging.com for more information

April 2005
The Business of Singing Workshop at New England Conservatory of Music, Boston, MA

July 19 – 25 2005
The Business of Singing Workshops and Master Classes
Astoria Music Festival and Academy, Astoria, OR
Visit <http://www.astoriamusicfestival.com/aboutFest.php> for details.

Parting Thought:
When your ship doesn't come in, swim out to it.
~ Jonathan Winters

Thanks for reading!

If you wish to subscribe/unsubscribe you may do so on the Singers Resources page at www.thebusinessofsinging.com.

Archived copies of this newsletter may be found on the Singers Resources page as well.

If you have questions for me or any of the contributors; comments; letters to the editor; requests; etc. please address them to me, Cindy Sadler, at info@thebusinessofsinging.com.