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FOLLOWING A PERIOD OF PROLIFIC PRODUCTIVITY by the American Academy of Teachers of Singing (AATS), during which the academy issued several statements of significance to the voice profession, the *Journal of Singing* is pleased to publish three consecutive “NATS Visits AATS” columns. This second installment is a follow-up to an earlier paper, “Advancing the Culture of Mentoring in Our Profession” (*Journal of Singing* 74, no. 5 [May/June 2018]: 493–498). The paper was presented in a session at the 2018 NATS National Conference in Las Vegas, which in turn generated an Academy survey whose results are summarized in the present statement.

A history of the Academy and its seminal relationship to NATS may be found in the previous issue of this periodical (*Journal of Singing* 77, no. 1 [September/October 2020]: 15). The publication of statements does not imply NATS endorsement, nor does their content necessarily reflect the philosophy of NATS or the *Journal of Singing*. Readers are invited to visit the AATS website (www.americanacademyofteachersofsinging.org).

MENTORING: TAKE(S) 2

Mentoring is a matter of continuing interest to the voice community, particularly given new hybrid musical genres, advances in scientific measurement, and an incorporation of kinesthetic approaches into individual instruction. Teaching voice may be thought of as an intersection of multiple disciplines including technique, artistry, musicianship, voice science, language, repertoire, and, more generally, flexibility in delivery related to students’ learning styles. Many of us began our careers as singers before eventually including some aspects of teaching to our professional activities. We learned on the job, often aided by mentors in some way even if we may not have been fully aware of it.

PROLOGUE: PRESENTATION AND SURVEY

In 2018 AATS presented “Mentoring: Models for Change in the Culture of Collaboration” at the biennial NATS National Conference. In that paper, later published in the *Journal of Singing*, we discussed what we felt were salient points about mentoring. Most of us had experience both as mentors and mentees and our paper detailed some of those experiences. The presentation revealed to us that this subject generated much interest, and that there was more to learn. We created a follow-up survey with twenty-three questions sent out via Survey Monkey. These questions were based on the original paper but were designed to elicit various types of responses, so they included both specific and open-ended questions. Four hundred forty-nine (449) participants completed the survey. This robust response was owing in part to our collaborating organization, NATS, which included the survey link in *Intermezzo*, a weekly email sent to its entire membership of well over six thousand (6,661 as of June 1, 2018). Additionally, we experienced the “snowball” effect, wherein surveys were forwarded to colleagues, friends, or students of interest. In this current paper, we will share those responses and

discuss our findings, including ideas that support our original paper, but also ideas that we had not considered. A summary of questions that were answered directly will be presented first, followed by a review of those questions that had open-ended responses. Responses were then analyzed by multiple members of the Academy (AATS) to look for any overlapping themes, commonalities, and/or differences among the comments. It should be noted that these responses relate to those taking the survey only and cannot be generalized.

ACT ONE: INITIAL RESPONSES

Of the 449 respondents who completed the survey, 327 self-reported that they had been mentored, representing 70% of the respondents. When we asked *how* they mentored, we received a wide variety of responses. (Please note that participants could choose more than one option.) Our most frequent responses were:

- what to listen for in a lesson (70%)
- how to structure a lesson (54%)
- how to assign repertoire (48%)
- how to correct lyric diction (47%)

Other answers included:

- how to accompany vocal exercises (24%)
- how to accompany repertoire (16%)
- how to manage a studio (19%)
- how to recruit students (14%)

A specific question on mentoring in the business aspect of running an independent studio received a (20%) positive response. In other words, 80% of those who responded did *not* receive any advice on running a studio.

Most often the mentees were mentored by their own voice teacher (65%). They were often mentored during school or the three years immediately following graduation (52%). However, 23% acknowledged multiple opportunities, including in the early years of teaching, and continuing throughout their teaching careers. This would seem to indicate that mentoring is important throughout the trajectory of a career, both to mentor and mentee.

The survey also collected information based on the backgrounds of the respondents. We saw a great variety of skills sets. All respondents had considerable

experience (55% had 21 or more years of teaching). Interestingly, 55% had also mentored someone already. Regarding mentoring experiences, the length of time and how the sessions were contracted all were highly variable and individualistic.

Where do we find commonalities? How can we organize the mentoring process to allow for more opportunities? It seems clear that, unlike other fields which provide internships, the lack of specific teacher training and certification means that although mentoring is an important part of the voice teacher's career development it remains primarily ad-hoc in nature.

ACT TWO: OPEN-ENDED RESPONSES

Our open-ended questions elicited a broad range of answers. We gleaned the most information from answers to the following three questions: "If you were mentored, please tell us *how* you were mentored?"; "What words best describe the mentor's way of interacting with you during the mentoring process?"; and, "Is there anything else you'd care to add?"

Respondents demonstrated great enthusiasm for the concept of mentoring as well as the effect mentoring had on their own teaching. The affirmation of one's own skills was a benefit mentors acknowledged, appreciating the time to refine their thoughts about methods, strategies, and approaches. Some felt they had an obligation to pass on their experience. Mentoring was also seen as a vital component in building communication within the profession.

In some cases, the process was as simple as conversations and sharing, such as "a lot of phone calls," "text [message] coaching," or "conversations and sharing of organizational materials." Mentoring could mean observing a teacher teach, having a teacher observe a mentee teach, or participating in the collaborative teaching of a voice lesson, each with a follow-up discussion. This could happen in person, via online methods, by a review of video-recorded lessons, or, as one respondent explained: "[the mentor] observed the first lesson I taught, and then once a month observed again, with discussion of observations." Workshops, courses, and master classes were frequently mentioned as opportunities for mentoring, some sparking important changes: "after the workshop . . . I began to formulate better plans for teaching my students."

Overcoming a fear of being judged helped the mentoring relationship to focus on “responding to questions and concerns” or “discussing teaching strategies and career goals.” Mentors were credited with “encouraging [teachers] to enter their students in competitions and to make arts their chosen profession . . .” A number of responses celebrated a lifetime of connection to mentors: “she maintains regular contact throughout our careers with her chat room”; “my high school choir teacher . . . is a renowned teacher, but she will still answer emails and any questions I have”; and, “she is often still joining me for yearly training opportunities.”

A number of responses articulated a larger view of the profession: “It was not just one person, but an entire philosophy of teaching based on science and practical application”; “I could not have asked for a better mentor, even though I guess we never called it exactly that”; “If I ever have a question I can always get answers”; “[Mentoring] is a mission of community and promoting artists staying and thriving in the arts; and I take it seriously and offer it with love and commitment.”

Unfortunately, for some university teachers, mentoring was not readily available to them. Some colleagues were not always open to the process. One response reveals this frustration:

“It is a two-way street and it doesn’t happen automatically. I wish my department chair had asked a senior faculty member to officially mentor me for a service credit. Instead, I have to go begging for help with specific projects and my colleagues are already busy with other things and are burdened by my requests for mentorship. It’s bad for morale all around. I don’t want to ask someone for help who doesn’t want to give me any help.”

Respondents who had been mentored mentioned characteristics that made the experience a positive one. Below are a few comments:

- “Discussing teaching concerns and techniques as *peers* (emphasis added)”
- “Comes alongside as a partner”
- “Open to questions and gracious with explanations”
- “Supportive of my abilities when I was less secure”
- “Very hands-on . . .”
- “Supportive, instructional, knowledgeable . . .”
- “Extremely detailed . . .”
- “Career changing”

Topics of mentoring ranged across the entire spectrum of voice pedagogy, including repertoire, lesson strategies, exercises, performance issues, as well as covering all aspects of running a business from recruitment to finances. One mentor noted, “I have instructed them in repertoire choice according to the student’s skill and experience level, pedagogical skills, auditory skills, and assignment of appropriate exercises.” Other activities mentioned were “creating a business plan, marketing, social media . . . [as well as] curriculum and goals for private and semi-private lessons.” And from another: “Inviting them to participate in lessons I am teaching.” “Helping with issues in the studio (technical and interpersonal)” was welcomed by a number of respondents. In addition, mentors have “provided access to all books in [the studio] library,” “introduced [mentees] to NATS and encouraged them to participate,” and supported teachers’ personal “voice care.”

Remuneration was not an important factor, but negative feelings were noted if mentors felt they had been taken advantage of or used for quick solutions. Seventy-five percent of those who had mentored said they were not compensated financially. Their benefits included instruction, knowledge, modeling, support, resources, encouragement, and collaboration. “Paid or not, I think mentoring is a wonderful thing to do.”

A number of responses related to early career mentoring: “It should take place sooner in the educational process . . .” “I found myself teaching based on what my teachers had done with me, but that wasn’t adequate . . . It’s not something you pick up by osmosis.” Mentoring can take place in a variety of settings: “Working with teachers in music education”; “I give talks to college pedagogy classes on how to start and maintain a successful private studio”; “sectionals at high schools where the choral director also teaches voice” or “navigating academia and career.” However, some mentors of early career teachers reported a drain on their energies: “I often feel used by beginner teachers—and find that more often than not they are looking for quick fixes and easy answers. Those types of relationships are hard.”

ACT THREE: CONNECTIONS

Connecting these comments back to our original 2018 paper, we found many responses that concur with our

original premise: “A teacher is always a student.” We are constantly acquiring new information, whether it is the science of voice, the psychology of teaching and learning, or methods and exercises to bring about change. It is likely that the mentor’s communication skills will be enhanced by the mentoring experience, a benefit confirmed by the survey respondents. One noted the mentoring experience was “extremely valuable . . . much to learn from each other . . .” And from another, “As a mentor, I have become a stronger teacher myself.”

As observed in the 2018 paper, “No teacher has all the answers; no teacher *must* have all the answers.” This helpful principle supports those who are fearful of judgment. Acknowledging the gaps in our own knowledge is a critical first step to take in the mentoring process. A supportive, positive approach is a mentor’s most effective initial strategy. One participant describes it as “respect, empathy, encouragement, expert information.” A further statement from the original paper emphasizes this point: “A successful mentor is a conduit rather than the sole possessor of information and technique.” One survey participant summed it up in the following words, “We must become courageous enough to allow the next generation to exceed our personal successes, and to humbly cheer them on in the process!”

Mentoring also supports basic psychological benefits of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Teaching applied voice often places one in an isolated environment that over time can narrow the scope of a teacher’s

perspective and limit the introduction of new ideas and fresh repertoire. Young teachers who are mentored acknowledge the debt they owe to those willing to coach them along. Ideally, they will choose to become mentors to their own students. One of the respondents echoed this very thought: “I look forward to being able to pay it forward.”

CODA: CALL TO ACTION

In summary, we see commonalities among mentoring experiences even though the settings may vary a great deal. Personal qualities of mentors include common sense, strong work ethic, interpersonal sensitivity, empathy, a love for the arts, mutual respect and commitment, a collaborative spirit.

We hope this paper serves as a call to action. Several organizations, listed in the original 2018 article, have devised programs through which their members can serve as mentors and arrange to be mentored. A number of respondents referred to these programs as life changing. Academic music programs often include concepts of mentoring in their pedagogy curriculum and student teaching. Additionally, some private teachers have not only found colleagues with whom to share ideas, but have also shared generously with inquiring, aspiring students. In all cases, mentor and mentee must be proactive in initiating and maintaining these important relationships. It takes two!

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