

In the Place Just Right (Keynote Address)

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In 2004, Ki Adams called and asked me if I would agree to give a keynote address to the 2005 *Phenomenon of Singing Symposium*. He asked me to speak about myself, my life, career, my decision to retire from performing. He asked me, too, to give some advice for young singers beginning in the life of a classical singer. The more I thought about it, the more daunting it became. Just to tell the story of my life, the highlights of my career, the people who have influenced me, and so forth, seemed insufficient.

I would need, for my own sake, if not for yours, to make some sense of it all. I would need to decipher some pattern or scheme or unifying thread which would not only make a brilliantly executed speech, but which would also show that I have skilfully and unerringly navigated my way through the labyrinth of my life and career according to a brilliantly conceived master plan. And so, ladies and gentlemen, I have returned again and again in my thoughts to an examination of my life in search of the Key, the Pattern, the Plan. And I've discovered the following:

1. Whenever I had a plan, it seldom worked out the way I thought it would. But circuitous routes are often far more interesting and educational than the original plan provided for.
2. If there is a unifying thread in the good things I've done professionally and my reasons for doing them, that thread is words—language—as a means of communication through music.

My passion for speech and communication preceded my love of singing. When I was a child, we had a little neighbourhood boy who had a serious speech defect. This distressed me terribly. I spent as much time with him as I could keep his attention, trying to teach him to speak. I could not bear the difficulty he had to make himself understood. Later, in my late teens, I worked closely with two deaf sisters, even learned sign language so that we could communicate better. But what I really wanted was to help them *speak* clearly. Thus, it was that I decided speech therapy should be my chosen career. That was perhaps my first plan gone astray.

I loved languages and studied German, as well as French, and Latin, all through high school. Little did I know then that that would be the most beneficial thing I could

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have done with my high school years, given the career path I would later take. When your students ask you what they should be studying outside of their compulsory school curriculum, tell them languages! Like everything else, it becomes more and more difficult to learn languages as one ages, and more and more costly too! Take them in high school if at all possible. Continue them at university. Languages (not just diction) are primary tools for a classical singer. And which one is most beneficial, do you think? Latin, the one that is more and more rarely taught in high school!

I took singing lessons from the age of 11 and performed a great deal in recitals at my teacher's studio, in church, at school, and in Kiwanis festivals. I had also appeared in the musicals *Little Mary Sunshine*, *Brigadoon*, and *My Fair Lady* at St. Michael's College School in Toronto. It is a boys' school, but for that reason they needed girls to fill out the female roles, and girls they got, coming out to audition every fall from all the girls' Catholic high schools in Toronto. Those were happy, happy days with many wonderful memories and one particularly wonderful after-effect, of which I'll have more to say in a while. All that performing experience in those early years was also extremely nurturing of my self-confidence and comfort on the stage in later life.

I can honestly say that it never occurred to me to pursue singing as a profession before my first year of university. I didn't know anyone who made a living by singing. Singing was so natural, one just did it, enjoyed it, took it for granted. I loved watching singers on the *Ed Sullivan Show*—Kate Smith, Roberta Peters, Jane Powell, Deanna Durban. But they were so far removed from me. It seemed nothing to do with my life. Nowadays, I believe, there are many performing arts groups that visit schools and rub shoulders with young people, allowing them the opportunity to have a window into what a life in the arts might look like. This is a wonderful innovation, which is much to be encouraged, especially in smaller communities where embryonic artists might otherwise never find a path for themselves.

Fortunately for me, in my first year of a general arts degree at the University of Toronto, a friend from St. Michael's invited a bunch of us from the musicals to be extras for the Canadian Opera Company in a production of *Carmen*. An "extra" or a "super" is a non-singing part who, nevertheless, is often onstage quite a lot and certainly rubs shoulders with the opera singers, both chorus and principals. I pushed a flower cart and appeared in all the crowd scenes. It was a whole new world. I was thunderstruck! I stood in the wings and listened to the arias. I went home and tried to sing them. I took them to my singing teacher. And I was sure I could do what those chorus singers were doing, and also sure that they were earning more than the \$2 per show that I was earning. No matter. I'd have paid them to let me go on stage again and again.

I never looked back really. I began to work seriously at my singing and the speech therapy plan began to recede. I completed two years of my BA at the University of Toronto while singing in the Toronto Mendelssohn Choir and, for a short while, also with the professional choir, the Festival Singers of Canada. Then I took a year of full-time study at The Royal Conservatory of Music, and that Christmas, December 1972, I made my professional solo debut, singing *Messiah* for the St. Catharines Symphony Orchestra.

The experience of the first rehearsal is indelibly etched in my memory. I took my seat with the other soloists between the orchestra and the choir and I felt like Cinderella arrived at the ball. When the orchestra began to tune, I shut my eyes and promised myself I would never forget that moment.

Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, God, for giving me
this time, this place, this music, these words, this voice, this
chance to be who I truly am, in the life that is my own, where I
belong.

And so often in all the ensuing years, the sound of the orchestra tuning has brought the same wash of euphoric thanksgiving over me. I went on to sing *Messiah* every Christmas season, but one in the 30 years of my singing career. Some Decembers I sang up to 13 performances in five different cities. One of those Decembers was when I was carrying my first child. She loved it. I used to say she was trying to conduct in there. During that pregnancy I recorded *Messiah* with John Eliot Gardiner and his English Baroque Soloists. My second child was born at home, and during the labour we listened to that recording of *Messiah*. Erin was born during the "Hallelujah Chorus" on the second time around. I've never counted up all the performances of *Messiah* that I participated in over the 30 years, but I can tell you with absolute honesty that I never, never tired of that divinely inspired music. I loved singing it every time. I loved telling the story and always delighted in remembering that in every audience there was someone who was hearing that music for the first time. What a privilege it was for me to be the giver of that gift!

In my final performance season, 2002-2003, there were many emotional moments, as I sang some of the pillars of my repertoire for the last time. My final *Messiahs* in December of 2002 were in San Francisco and Toronto. In San Francisco, the conductor was the wonderful Jane Glover and this was my first time working for her. During the first rehearsal I felt a little scratchy in the throat and immediately launched into my

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routine of homeopathic medicine, lots of water, and rest. I sang the first performance and my voice disappeared as the performance went on. The five performances were spread out over eight days and I was sure I'd recover in time to continue. I took SUCH good care of myself! I even broke down and took the cortisone treatment, but even that didn't work. Alas, I had to cancel every performance after the first one, although I continued to think I was almost better, but never quite better enough. That was heartbreaking. I had so looked forward to those performances!

Then I returned to Toronto for the final three *Messiahs* of my career. Singing *Messiah* with the Toronto Mendelssohn Choir was always thrilling for me because I had first sung *Messiah* as a member of that great chorus under Elmer Iseler. The members of the choir had always been very supportive of me, and I loved my solo engagements with them. For this last *Messiah* my conductor was Nicholas Kraemer with whom I had performed and recorded Handel's *Rodelinda*. But still, after two weeks of voicelessness, my singing was not right. I felt as though I was singing around the edges of my voice, as though it had no core. Management, conductor, orchestra, chorus, fellow soloists, everyone was wonderfully encouraging and supportive. They all knew how badly I needed to sing these final performances, and I think by the force of their collective good will, I managed to pull it off. In a way, struggling with my voice like that distracted me from the emotional intensity of singing it for the last time. I managed to hold it all together through all my solos, but on the final night, when the choir began the "Amen Chorus," I absolutely lost it. Floods of tears! That was by far the hardest moment of the retirement process—saying goodbye to *Messiah*. And I have to admit, it's really very difficult for me to attend *Messiah* performances now and stay in my seat.

It's somewhat ironic that, although it was an operatic experience that gave me the bug, that turbo-charged my desire to sing, I subsequently took part in fully staged operatic productions very rarely. One of the keys to my success, I think, was that I became the kind of singer I was designed to be. It is important whenever possible with young singers to help them find their natural talents and propensities and to build on them. The training should complement and develop the natural giftedness. The more I learned about my voice and myself, the more I understood myself to be a concert singer. It was a matter partly of the size of my vocal instrument—it suited Baroque opera very well, and Mozart and perhaps contemporary chamber opera—but it was not of the amplitude for mainstream Grand Opera. (I would never get to sing the lead in *Carmen*, after all.) It was also a matter of temperament. It's not just the larger-than-life personality that's needed to project a character across the footlights and orchestra pit. It's a hard life—nomadic, solitary, and independent or heavily dependent on one's

colleagues of the moment. It's a very difficult life for a singer with a spouse and family. I ought to know. I was married to an opera singer for 20 years.

No, myself, I preferred the concert/oratorio singer's life. It's clean. Arrive, rehearse for a few days, perform for a few days, get paid, go home. Oh, it wasn't always quite that simple. But, by and large, it allowed me to travel the world, meet and make music with some brilliantly talented colleagues, and to perform in some of the world's finest concert halls, from Amsterdam to Tokyo. I've also sung in church halls and cinemas and living rooms and school gymnasias—from Corsica to Kaslo—for audiences I wouldn't have missed for the world. It allowed me to spend time at home between engagements, time to be a homemaker and a member of a normal family. It allowed me time at home to practice and study and coach for my next engagements (though it never seemed quite enough). I'm particularly pleased that it allowed me to record extensively. Having 30-some CDs, of which I'm mostly proud, made it easier for me to stop two years ago. They made it easier, and, in a way, they also made it necessary. When I listen to my recordings now, I think, "Yes. That was fine. And that was then. Now it's time to move on."

I wanted desperately to be a good mom. My own mother was a hard act to follow. I didn't have my girls until I was 33 and 37 when my career was already pretty well established. I was doing well enough by then that we could have live-in nannies until my younger daughter was in school all day. I knew that I had to keep the momentum of the career going or I might not get it back. So there were a few years where I really just about broke even, travelling to all my engagements with nanny and baby in tow, even in Europe. (I could easily go on for another half-hour just on those experiences.)

I must also give credit to my wonderful parents who were my right and left arms in helping me raise my daughters. They were always there for them as they were for me in every way possible.

Both my parents came to Canada, to Toronto, in the 1940s, my mother during, and my father just after the Second World War. My father, Cormac Patrick Robbin, came from Belfast, Northern Ireland, having served as an electrician in the RAF. Una May Greening came from Millertown, Newfoundland, to Toronto in 1943 when Newfoundland was not yet a province of Canada. Neither of my parents had ever had musical training. Dad, being Irish, was musical and loved singing and knew lots of songs. Mom, though she had sung in the church choir back home, insists she was only there to fill up the seat. So, when I came along, singing and wanting piano and singing lessons, I was a bit of a puzzle to them, I'm sure. But they did all they could to encourage and support me. I'll never forget my joy, coming downstairs on the

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Christmas morning when I was 12 finding a 28-key electric keyboard under the tree. Until then I had practiced on a cardboard keyboard. I'm not sure my piano teacher ever knew that. My parents never did own a piano.

It was in my second year of university, during my brief stint in the Festival Singers of Canada, that I met and fell in love with my future husband. He was tall and good looking, had a beautiful bass voice, and was steeped in the musical world that I was just beginning to scratch the surface of. We were married five years later after having spent two seasons in London studying singing while he sang in the chorus of the Royal Opera House Covent Garden. Those years were a wonderful opportunity for us to grow musically and culturally. Immediately after our marriage, we moved to Vancouver where he had a position in the Vancouver Opera's apprentice program under Richard Bonyngue. I took the opportunity to complete my degree at Simon Fraser University, entirely with English literature courses. Meanwhile, I also got a Canada Council grant to study singing in Vancouver with Jacob Hamm and Phyllis Mailing. But Vancouver was a dead-end for my husband as the apprentice program folded after our first year there and he was earning a living singing touring productions for the Canadian Opera Company back in Ontario. So, after the second year in Vancouver, we returned to Toronto and stayed there until our first daughter, Leigh, was born in 1983, when we moved to the country, near Alliston, Ontario, about 60 km from Toronto.

They say that one of the necessary evils of a musical soloist's career is dealing with agents or managers, as they prefer to be called. One of the questions I am most frequently asked by young singers is how to get a place on the roster of a good artists' management. The first fact to take hold of is that it is not necessarily better to have a manager than not to have a manager. It depends on the manager and also on the preparation of the singer. It is highly unlikely that someone will *discover* you. You will have to build the career yourself. First of all, it is important to have a solid musical preparation and technical proficiency. You will do yourself no favours by being heard professionally before you are fully prepared. When you and your advisors feel you really are ready, my advice is to get your career rolling by yourself and then, when managers see that you are beginning to be successful, they will want a piece of the action. A good manager will want to get in early and help you build your career gradually and sensibly with a long view in mind. The best way to attract a manager is to have some engagements and press notices and, especially, references from a conductor or two. So if you have a gig coming up, send a ticket to the manager of choice. If he doesn't attend, send a program and a review and a note hoping he'll be

able to attend your next event. Be persistent and you will wear down his indifference if you have good work to show him.

And how does a young singer get those first key engagements? Audition, audition, audition. Nowadays I think it is important to have a CD or even DVD audition recording. The rule of thumb is to have five operatic arias and five oratorio arias polished to within an inch of their lives and ready to sing at any given moment. These go on the audition tape or possibly on two separate tapes for different types of sponsoring organizations, operatic or choral. It's unlikely that you will be hired on the basis of a recording, but it might get you in the door of a busy conductor for an audition. Make the best quality recording you can afford. The art of doing a good live audition is a very important one to learn. There have been many articles and books written on the subject. Read them. Prepare. Play to your strengths, not to what you imagine they want to hear.

I was very lucky in the management department. It was in 1977, shortly after my return from Vancouver, that Joanne Hart and Anne Murdock heard me one weekend singing performances of *Messiah* on Friday night and contemporary songs by Michael Colgrass on Sunday afternoon. They were sufficiently impressed that they invited me to their office for an interview. It was the beginning of a 20-year association, which was marked by honesty, generosity, mutual respect, and great affection.

It was Anne and Joanne who encouraged me to enter the international voice competitions of Paris and Geneva in 1978, and the Benson and Hedges Competition in Aldeburgh, England, in 1979. My winning results from those competitions led to some excellent press and new engagements here at home in Canada, as well as some invaluable concert and touring opportunities in Europe.

It was also Anne Murdock who felt it was time for me to record and who arranged my first recordings for Marquis Records in Toronto in the early 1980s. It was Anne Murdock who arranged for me to have representation in London with Ron Gonsalves Artists Management and that led to the many exciting years I spent working for conductors like John Eliot Gardiner, Christopher Hogwood, Trevor Pinnock, and Roger Norrington, and for recording companies such as Deutsche Grammophone, EMI, Phillips, and Erato, with festival appearances and touring, and so many unforgettable concerts.

I had a brief period in the early 1990s where I thought the way forward meant having a New York management, and Hart/Murdock even suffered through that one with me. They went on representing me for Canadian recital work for those three years, and thank God they did, because the man in New York got me only one job in the entire

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period. Of course, he was always happy to write up contracts and collect the 20% on the work I got for myself. Anne and Jo were there with open arms to take me back as soon as I could extricate myself from the contract with him.

When they decided to retire from the business I was devastated. In the same year, my marriage had ended, and Ron Gonsalves (my English manager) had retired and his business had changed hands. I felt I just couldn't lose another cornerstone of my life. There again, Anne and Jo stood by me and said they'd look after me for as long as it took for me to find someone else with whom I'd be happy working. Eventually I made the shift to Dean Artists in Toronto, again having scouted out several American agencies, but never feeling quite comfortable with any of them. Carol Anne Curry and Henry Ingram of Dean Artists were the right choice for me, and they looked after my career extremely well for the last five years of it, always with a sense of humour, always with a realistic perspective, as well as with an enthusiastic belief in my abilities and pride in my accomplishments. And my British manager for the last years was the wonderful Caroline Phillips who remains a dear friend.

It is the performing artist alone whom you see on stage, hear on recording, and read about in the magazines and newspapers. But you can bet there are key people behind the scenes who are making that career possible—the agents, the parents, the families—keeping that singer sane, encouraging her through the dry spells, looking after her children in the crazy busy spells, and loving her through it all. We really mustn't resent the long thank you speeches that movie actors make when they receive Academy Awards. They are rightfully acknowledging the sort of support people I have just mentioned. If I had to make one of those speeches, I'd have a lot of people to thank.

Once or twice in my life, I have come across those who believed that a performer, one of those gifted with extraordinary talent and thus obliged to share those gifts with the world, ought not to marry and have children, but ought to dedicate herself to a life of art and art alone. It's an interesting concept. At times, I have wondered what I might have accomplished if singing had been my only vocation, if my own professional needs and opportunities had been my only concern. But then I also have to ask myself what would remain when I left the stage behind. A fat scrap book and a shelf full of CDs would be cold company, I think.

And so it was, about three and a half years ago, after a great deal of soul searching, that I decided to stop singing professionally, to "retire from the stage" at the end of the 2002-2003 season. I had always said that I would retire before people said I ought to. I so admired the great English mezzo, Janet Baker, for the strength and integrity of her early decision to retire. She didn't wait for the audience to notice that her performance

wasn't what it had once been. She recognized that her prime was behind her and perhaps, like me, she didn't want to wait until she read about it in the paper.

My good friend and long-time accompanist, Michael McMahon, and I had a pact. I had told him my fear of singing past my sell by date. We've all heard these singers, great artists in their time, but whose voices have succumbed to the cruel and inevitable ravages of age. I don't want to get into the subject of menopause here, but let's face it, the female voice is not unscathed by the hormonal changes that occur in a woman of *a certain age*. Come to think of it, what part of her body, or mind for that matter, is not affected? In any case, Michael and I had a code phrase that he would use when he felt that the time had come for me to graciously quit the stage. "Catherine, don't you think it's time to put in another flower bed?" Well, as it turned out, it was I who announced to Michael that I was planning to revamp the garden.

No one I made my early announcement to seemed surprised. My close friends knew, perhaps even my audiences noticed without knowing the reason why, that the turn of the millennium had found me a very happy woman. Late in 1999, I remarried. My husband of almost six years now, is Eugene McEleney, whom I met in those musicals I mentioned when we were both in high school. We met again, by chance in 1998, and by a year later we were married with five children between us.

My marriage to Eugene is a whole new chapter in my life. It's another chance for me to be a good wife and experience the joys of a good marriage. I know now that it takes a daily commitment, a real sharing of everyday joys and challenges, a nurturing of common interests. I know that the best way to make that happen is to actually be together and not in different cities, talking on the phone from hotel rooms, or seeing each other off at airports. I spent 30 years packing and unpacking suitcases, waking up in hotel rooms where the first question I ask myself in the morning is "Where am I today?"

I had only a few years left of having my girls at home and I wanted to be there. The time had come, too, when I didn't want to worry about being in another country if something should happen to one of my parents and they should need me. My dad passed away last summer, and I was indeed very glad to be at home during his illness and to support my mom, both then and now.

Please don't think that I have regrets about the wonderful career that I had. It was a joy and a privilege, and if I can't say that I loved absolutely every minute of it, I can at least say that even the bits I didn't love made me stronger and wiser, a better person, and therefore a better singer. I always knew that I was doing what I was born to do; that I was indeed "in the place just right" though the life that came with the gift didn't

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always seem to be either simple or free. I never attended a workshop or read a textbook on preparing for the life of a classical singer. Of course, every singer has the opportunity and the daunting responsibility to make a plan for the building of his or her individual career and the accommodation of a life around the edges. Plans have to be flexible, and to a great extent, one has to make it up as one goes along. However, I do think it behoves us as teachers and role models to open our students' eyes to the personal sacrifices that are necessary to make a go of it. It is not a career path to be undertaken, or even attempted, lightly.

Teaching singing is the other great passion in my new life. I've always dabbled in at least a little teaching, and have greatly enjoyed giving masterclasses in many of the places where I performed. I have also enjoyed doing some competition adjudication. Five years ago I took on a teaching job at York University in Toronto, just a few students to start, then a few more. I found it kind of addictive. In those couple of years I felt my passion shifting from performing to teaching. Doing both at the same time was extremely difficult, I found, requiring a completely different kind of energy. It began to be clear to me that if I had to choose between them, I would choose teaching. In 2003, I applied for, and was awarded, a professorial appointment at York University and now I have full scope to indulge my addiction. I have always loved to sing and to communicate thought and emotions with my voice with sung words. How wonderful to share that joy with others who want to do the same!

So what is it that voice students need to be taught? I think it's important to know what can be taught and to continually learn how to teach it. It's just as important, perhaps, to recognize what cannot be taught. As Sergius Kagen says, "no one can teach an ungifted singer how to be less ungifted" (Kagen, 1950). I do know that it is not the case that the best voices are necessarily the most successful. It can be argued that talent is fairly low on the list of essential attributes of successful singers. The great American pedagogue, Richard Miller, enumerates the seven pillars of performance success as follows: musicianship, vocal technique, artistic imagination, objectivity, perseverance, talent, and business acumen (Miller, 1996). Well, musicianship and vocal technique can certainly be taught. Artistic imagination is, in large measure, inborn, I think, and stimulated by exposure to good literature as well as a certain amount of *life lived*. It can, however be liberated somewhat by learning to risk revealing the inner self. We can teach that. I think it gets easier, too, as the technical aspects of singing become more secure. Objectivity and perseverance are not always evident in a beginning student, but an honest and interested teacher can instil those values, I think. Then we come to talent. It cannot be taught, though it can be discovered and developed. Without large measures

of the other six qualities, talent is tragically not of much use. If you have the other six and no talent, or insufficient talent, it's equally useless. All teachers are familiar with the frustration of having a student with talent coming out her ears, but without any work ethic. Or of the student who works her little tail off but hasn't the voice to fulfill her dreams. The final pillar of success is business acumen. A singer in search of a career requires self-organization, energy, courage, and disciplined living. Can those things be taught? Perhaps one can teach oneself those qualities. Even a manager can't help you with all of it. In the end, it comes down to the individual singer's desire to pursue an irresistible goal.

In its simplest terms, there are only two parts to singing: the breath and the word. A singer's job is to breathe deeply and speak truly. Breathe deeply, that is to fill yourself with the life energy that is everywhere and always around you. To speak truly, the sung word must be the same as the spoken word, as true, as natural, as grounded in the body, as attached to the breath. The key to beautiful singing is beautiful speech. The key to emotional communication is complete understanding of the poem, the lyrics, and absolute honesty of speech in their delivery.

Now do you see why the circuitous route to realizing my passion for speech and communications was the right path after all? I opened my farewell recital with Aaron Copland's setting of the eighteenth century Shaker song:

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free
'Tis the gift to come down where you ought to be
And when we find ourselves in the place just right
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for letting me share these reminiscences and ideas with you this evening. Before I leave you, I've been asked to sing you something. (Just a little peak out of retirement.) Originally, my remarkable 85-year old Newfoundland mother was going to accompany me to St. John's, but she decided she didn't feel up to the trip. In tribute to her and to this beautiful island of my roots, I'd like to sing a Newfoundland folksong arrangement by Keith Bissell, "The Star of Belle Isle."

References

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