SPREADING THE WORD (and the MUSIC):
Come join us for our next SONG JAM!

You knew it was coming...
It's time for another SONG JAM!
A nifty way to get some new repertoire ideas, hear good performances,
chat with some new friends,
AND
earn a recital credit!

For heaven's sake, BE there. And bring a friend.

The idea for the SONG JAM began to percolate at the end of my second sabbatical in 2006, by which time I had acquired a considerable amount of music written by women composers. As a collaborative pianist and vocal coach of many years, I had learned, performed, and taught a large amount of vocal and chamber music, but - partly by virtue of my vocation and partly due to my accommodating personality - my repertoire had always been of someone else's choosing. I was, to put it bluntly, paid to learn the music that was put in front of me - always an exciting challenge, certainly, but one that involved no imagination on my part. It was not until the late 1990's that the works of female composers began to appear on my doorstep with more frequency, and, as a result, my own curiosity in these composers began to grow. These two, semester-long breaks from my teaching position here at Luther College offered me the perfect opportunity to take control of my life, so to speak, and to begin my own search for women composers and their music.

Because I had had limited exposure to more than a few women composers at this point of my career, the first project that I crafted set no boundaries other than a concentration on art song. I was interested in women's music of all eras, all styles, from all countries, set in all languages, and scores that were published or not. The second proposal in 2006 had a more narrow focus on contemporary (20th-21st century) art song by American women composers. Both of these interludes were tremendous fun and opened up a new body of repertoire for me. Since then, I’ve made it my mission to find performers who would share my enthusiasm.

My initial move was to get my name on the year's academic calendar with a collaborative recital on which I programmed a large sampling of this music. As is normal with faculty-sponsored recitals, my collaborators were my teaching colleagues here at Luther. It was a long, ambitious program comprised of songs by Margaret Garwood, Jenny McLeod, Madeleine Dring, Patsy Rogers, Betty Jackson King, Edith Borroff, Claire Brook, Emma Lou Diemer, Ruth Schonthal, and Undine Smith Moore. Since that first concert, my collaborative recitals have become annual events, and - thanks to our large, talented faculty - I am able to program a wide range of both solo vocal and chamber music.
By the end of this second project, however, it had become apparent to me that one 65-minute recital each year was inadequate if I wanted to bring larger amounts of repertoire to my audiences. Furthermore, while I believe the students were appreciative of the concerts, it finally dawned on me that there was a certain cognitive distance between the students and the repertoire my faculty collaborators and I were performing. My goal was for young singers to listen to this music with a level of interest that made them say to themselves, "I really love this piece. How would it sound in my voice? Where do I find the score?" I wasn't convinced that my motives were evident. Clearly, another vehicle was needed.

Luther College is a first-rate, liberal arts college of 2,600 students, located in an idyllic corner of Iowa. The voice area of the music department regularly serves 300-400 students enrolled for private lessons with a voice faculty of fifteen. As the vocal coach in this department, I have a studio that ranges in size from 25 to 30 singers in any given semester. What about making the group of singers in my studio my initial audience, dedicating one of our weekly seminars as a 'show and tell' session? I would conduct it like a vocal repertoire class, where each singer learned one piece and performed it for the group. Or, perhaps engage all of them in a rollicking sight-reading session (much like an instrumental "jam" session) where they would exercise their musicianship skills, enjoy a flood of new tunes, and have fun at the same time? (I must admit, this second idea appealed more to me...) Whichever of these ideas I chose, the premise was still in place: The most convincing way to 'sell' something is to have the individual 'try it on' or, in this case, to sing it themselves or hear one of their peers do so at close range.

Being the optimist I am, the thought occurred to me that we could open up this reading session to curious singers and pianists outside my studio, but the possibility of attracting too many interested people would make our relatively small meeting room impractical. To make sure to accommodate those who might join us, I thought of a change of location to the small recital hall that seats 200, located just off of the 1,600-seat Center for Faith and Life performance hall across campus. My next reality check, however, revealed that this intimate "jam session" could become too large an affair, making the logistics of sharing music impossible, and the fun challenge of sight-reading scores in front of an audience too stressful - not to mention doing a disservice to the music itself.

After sifting through all of these issues, what eventually evolved from my original goal of bringing a large quantity of music to as many interested people as possible is my Art Song Jamboree series (affectionately known these days as a "SONG JAM"), a twice-yearly performance given in the recital hall described above. These are, indeed, held during my normal studio seminar time on Monday at 5:15 p.m., ending at 6:00 pm sharp. An odd time for a public performance, one might argue, but because this time slot is already in place as an academic event, a number of potential obstacles are circumvented. The recital hall sees virtually no other campus activity at this hour; the recital hall is conveniently located, serving community members of our audiences; choral organizations have just ended their rehearsals, and most teaching days are winding down. Finally, our incredibly full department calendar suffers no more stress from an added performance during prime evening or weekend hours. With our eight-year history, we have
established a predictable pattern for the two events, the first in late October and the
second in mid-March. In the end (my optimistic self said), who wouldn't want to end
their work/study day with a compact jewel of a musical event like this before going home
for a relaxing dinner?

My original plan was ambitious: We offered four JAM programs a year, two each
semester, for the first five years of the series, and this proved to be unrealistic for all
concerned. The preparation process for me involves finding and researching new
repertoire, obtaining scores, recruiting singers, assigning repertoire and shaping a varied
and interesting program (these two steps cannot proceed independently from one another,
always with an eye to program length), coaching the singers, preparing the written
program with modest informational notes, and, finally, learning the music myself.
Perhaps the most serious casualty of this earlier plan was in fulfilling an obligation to get
the music to the singers in a timely fashion once the semester began. Cutting back to one
program a semester has put the joy back into the project and a much higher comfort level
among all of us on stage.

The performers are drawn from my studio, with two to three guest singers from the voice
faculty. I assign repertoire as I judge will fit their voices and in a language they feel they
can perform comfortably. I craft the programs for each JAM looking for a wide variety
of styles, languages, emotional and musical tone, and voice types. The only 'theme' I
need adhere to is that of variety, and the audience is fully engaged, never quite sure what
they will hear next. Given that some - if not all - of the composers on the program will
be new to the audience, I try to include at least two compositions by each composer on
that day's program. The student singers are strongly encouraged to memorize their piece,
and most are able to follow through. If, at the eleventh hour, a student is clearly
uncomfortable for some reason, I allow them to have the score on stage with them,
always stressing that they need to 'sell' the piece to an audience who is likely never to
have heard it before. This goal is especially valuable, I believe, for our young
performers. They are required to learn the piece on their own and to 'take ownership' of
the piece. Many of these songs are not available on any type of recording, making it
necessary for the singers to exercise their own musicianship skills, and - even more
important - find their own musical voice. Since much of this music is new to me as well,
we learn together and exchange ideas as we go. Finally, the dress code is what I call
'dressy casual', a standard to which they are able to rise after a long day of classes,
rehearsals, and study.

Performers come up from the audience at their appointed time and are, therefore, able to
enjoy the performances of their colleagues and mentors. Since each student has prepared
their song in the shelter of their practice room and in my studio, this means that they are
performing their JAM piece for the first time, unheard by most people in the room -
including their voice teachers. This brings a level of surprise that is fun for them and for
the audience. It also brings a bit of trepidation that they need to deal with, and I do as
much as I can to help them anticipate and be ready for the challenge. (I advise the
singers to find a few minutes in their day to go to the empty hall to experience the space.
We have no rehearsals in the hall, and this is an added challenge that they learn to
conquer.) Again, each program includes several faculty performers, and the experience of sharing a place on the program with their departmental mentors has proven to be inspiring for students, and they invariably rise to the occasion.

The JAMs are advertised around the department, the campus, and even in local news outlets. The ads that I compose myself and post around the music building, newly-designed for every JAM, are light in spirit, designed with an effort to set the tone of enthusiastic experimentation. (I also try to keep any of us from taking ourselves too seriously.)

Yes, we know! You're tired of your NATS pieces!
So are your teachers and your friends!
Come to the next Art Song Jamboree
to get some new repertoire ideas to surprise/stump/delight the judges
for next year's competition!

Since each of our voice teachers has their own weekly seminar on a particular day during the week, at least two of these voice studios have seminars that overlap with mine. Those colleagues have given the event consistent support over the years, however, and some of them have even suspended their normal seminars to allow their students to attend, and most certainly if that particular faculty member has agreed to be one of the day's performers.

Our audiences include singers from other voice studios (I stipulate that each person in my studio bring a minimum of five friends to the JAM), other interested music faculty, and loyal community members. I begin each performance with a welcome from the stage and a short explanation of the origins and purpose of the series. It is tempting for me to share my own impressions of the music, hoping to enhance the audience's experience. I have discovered over time, however, that forty-five minutes go by quickly, and listeners are better served when I let the music speak for itself. My compromise is to urge the students (the teachers will do this naturally) to listen with purpose. These SONG JAMs are designed for their benefit, and the programs they have in their hands should be filed away somewhere for future reference. With this in mind, I include the expected basic information (composers names, dates, country of origin), but also titles of the complete song cycles, perhaps a list of other works by that composer, and always a list of editions that were used for that day's program entries. If I retrieve only five programs (out of sixty) left behind after the performance, I consider that day's SONG JAM a success!

No later than one week before the performance, each singer must send me electronic copies of their song texts and, when needed, translations. With minimal formatting on my part, each is transferred to transparency for use on an available overhead projector (Does anyone out there remember this quaint device?) to be shown onto the wall behind the performers for the audience, cutting down on paper use. A student volunteer manages these from the stage.
Last year was the first that I implemented a year-long internship for one of my talented collaborative student pianists, whereby she/he would rehearse with the singers. This has not only relieved me of some of the preparation time that the singers need, but also given good experience to the pianist. She or he is required to learn new repertoire quickly and work independently with the singers, offering suggestions when necessary and developing valuable coaching skills. I meet with the singers for a preliminary coaching session to clarify language pronunciation, tempi, and to share my immediate impressions of the piece. They continue work with my assistant, and I resume more frequent meetings with them closer to the performance, sessions that tend to evolve from teacher-student lessons into rehearsals between performing partners.

I have found the value in re-circulating repertoire from one JAM to the next, or on a program years later. Songs that have not been heard on a recent JAM will reappear in a different context, sung by a different singer. Multiple hearings of any piece of music are likely to bring deepened appreciation for the audiences and performers, but no less for myself. I have also learned that I often cannot predict what music will appeal to audiences and performers. This has made me more adventurous and even persistent in my programming. I never tire of the process. Coming across a volume of art songs that are new to me, whether I am familiar with the composer or not, never fails to thrill me, and some of them are sure to show up on the next JAM.

At one point some years ago, I ventured into the ListServ of IAWM with a description of my SONG JAM series with an open invitation to composers to send me news of their art songs. I received thoughtful and generous responses, and I am still sifting through these scores, always searching for the right opportunity to include these interesting pieces. There are variables with every program that I need to consider when selecting these songs, including available voice types, aptitude of a particular singer, length and difficulty of the music, and an appropriate context that I can provide on any particular program. If I could, I would list here the marvelous composers who sent me their scores as a result of that invitation. I assure all of them, and any composers who are also looking for a testing ground for their works, that these pieces will eventually find their way to our stage.

I am gratified to report that some of my former students and colleagues who have relocated have taken the idea of our modest art song series with them to other campuses, modifying the specifics to their new environment. What they have retained is the spirit of experimentation and inclusion, and this gives me great pleasure. It is what I have tried to do in following the example of my mentor of many years, pianist and vocal coach John Wustman, whose two concert series of a number of years ago featured the complete songs of Hugo Wolf and Franz Schubert. These monumental undertakings showed me how inspiring true artistic commitment, access to good talent, mutual cooperation, and superb planning could be.

As performers, we never tire of exploring new ways to express the human condition, and I am seeing in this generation of young singers a reassuring openness to music of all types. As professionals, we know that the canon is in place, and our undergraduates
should learn the treasures in that canon. Because of the more fluid exchange of new scholarship regarding old works and brand new music, however, more avenues of possibilities are open to them, and I would hope that this on-going SONG JAM series serves as one resource for our small part of the world. Just this past week, I spent a coaching session persistently plumbing the imagination of one of my talented, post-recital singers. (She was in the "What do I do now?" purgatory that we have all experienced). I wanted her to have a part in the selection process, asking what composers she had heard that appealed to her. The Libby Larsen set she sang on her recital (selections from Love After 1950) were fun for her, so I suggested she investigate Jocelyn Hagen to stay in the American idiom. Her eyes lit up as she asked, "Didn't (a friend of hers in my studio) just sing a piece of hers on the last SONG JAM? I loved it!" Indeed ...

The program of that very first SONG JAM on October 2, 2006, featured works by Margaret Garwood, Elisenda Fabregas, Emma Lou Diemer, Joyce Hope Suskind, Louise Talma, and Lori Laitman. The first SONG JAM of this 2013-14 year included music of Jocelyn Hagen, Fanny Hensel, Alma Mahler, Nadia Boulanger, Judith Cloud, Liza Lehmann, Mathilde von Kralik, Nancy Bloomer Deussen, and Josephine Lang. At the time of this writing, we are approaching our second JAM of the year on March 17 with a program that includes Amy Beach, more Kralik, Madeleine Dring, Elizabeth Haskins, Ruth Schonthal, Lady Poldowski, and Cécile Chaminade. The list of performers on the coming JAM will include - much to my delight - some of our newest faculty members who happen to be Luther College alums, all of whom performed on some of my earliest SONG JAMS when they were students.

The performers that I have enjoyed these past years all take great pride in their work and, I hope, have taken the SONG JAM project on as their project. The news announcements that come out of our Public Information Bureau continue to be timely and thorough, listing each program’s composers and performing personnel. It is important to me that these SONG JAMS not be seen as my performances (I had not, until this year, included my name on the programs), but rather as a group endeavor that is beneficial for the department and, above all, a celebration of the music itself. My gratitude to the performers, my colleagues, and Luther College itself is as deep as my enthusiasm for the project, and I hope to continue the collaboration well into the future.

As for these gifted composers whom I continue to meet through their music ... All have my eternal gratitude, and I hope they will consider these SONG JAMs our proud sign of support!

Submitted by

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