

Healthy Aging Magazine | Inspiration

healthyaging.net/magazine/winter-2022/finding-my-voice-at-sixty Link: (<https://healthyaging.net/magazine/winter-2022/finding-my-voice-at-sixty/>)



Inspiration

Finding My Voice at Sixty

By Lev Raphael

For years I dreamed of someday taking up the cello because I was in love with the sound of it, but when I finally had a summer off to start lessons, reconstructive surgery I needed for on one hand and an injury to the other burned that dream to the ground.

I grew up in a Manhattan apartment filled with music of all kinds and had played the piano into my teens but gave it up when writing became my focus. Now, turning 60, I really wanted to make music. Then it hit me: I'd had a semester of chorus in college and had even sung with the class more than once at Lincoln Center—was it possible that I still had a voice, any kind of voice?

I was guest teaching creative writing at Michigan State University, and a neighbor who was an opera singer told me that there was a Community Music School affiliated with MSU. Nervous and worried about being embarrassed, I signed up online for a test lesson.

I don't think I would have dared try this back in New York, where I knew professional singers and the world of music was all around me. It's not as if I was expecting to be "discovered" in any way, but the level of pressure seemed like it might be tolerable.

I'd lived more than half my life in Michigan, which is where my writing career flourished, thanks to not being constantly talking with peers about book deals and magazine coverage and reviews and everything else connected to the business of being a writer. It was a calmer place to live, with no pressure to be

famous, and my social life did not revolve around book parties and author feuds.

But was taking voice lessons really possible? I hadn't even sung in the shower for forty years. Was I headed for a giant shame spiral?

The studio I went to on the edge of MSU's campus was a drab, could-be-anywhere little building that was a tiny place for such a big adventure. A beige-walled, perhaps, 12 x 12 square studio was crammed with a small upright piano, a bookcase of mysterious, miscellaneous content including a broken red flower pot, a black metal music stand, a small brown Formica-topped table; and of course, a piano stool. The saving grace was a window with a view of oaks and maples that kept the room from feeling like a big closet.

Via email, I made a literary connection with my teacher Natalie because she had researched Pauline Viardot, the famous 19th singer who Russian novelist Turgenev had been in love with. Turgenev was my favorite Russian author. That small bond helped ease my nervousness—somewhat.

In-person, dark-haired Natalie, who looked in her thirties, was warm, had a bubbly, cheerful laugh, and was utterly relaxed and unthreatening. Her speaking voice was rich and musical, not that I should have been surprised. I filled her in on why I was there and what I wondered, and she started right away testing my range. It felt odd and intimidating to open my mouth at all and sing notes as she played them on the piano, but honestly, I didn't even consider it to be singing because I was so self-conscious.

That was a rare feeling for me. As an author, I was a veteran performer. I had done hundreds of invited talks and book readings on three different continents and taught hundreds of classes.

On book tours in the U.S. and abroad, I beguiled audiences of as many as 500 and earned standing ovations with keynote speeches and readings. I'd even spoken at the Library of Congress and sometimes given readings in more than one language.

But this little room, this tiny space, loomed as large as an ancient Roman arena where I was alone, facing a hostile crowd of thousands and that unpredictable emperor who could determine my fate with the flick of his thumb. I was scared, despite Natalie's warmth and friendliness.

Her initial assessment was that I might be a baritone, but time would tell as we worked together that I had "a lovely middle range" and that, yes, I had potential. Voice lessons would not be a waste of time.

I felt encouraged and welcomed but also overwhelmed. And maybe surprisingly overconfident because when Natalie asked me what I wanted to work on, I suggested a favorite German art song I'd listened to so often that I knew many of the words: the first song from Schubert's melancholy song cycle *Die Winterreise*. These songs had particular resonance for me because they had changed how I felt about the German language.

Growing up as the first-generation son of Holocaust survivors, I not only felt unlike anyone I knew growing up, but I'd always been irritated by that language when I heard it at close range—say on a city bus or in an elevator.

It was the language of the people who had murdered dozens of my family members. But the first time I heard the opening song on New York's classical radio station WQXR, I went out and bought the multi-disc recording by Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau soon after and listened to it as often as I could. It didn't just melt my antipathy to German; it made me find beauty in the language, it introduced me to the world of art songs (*lieder*), and it supplied a theme for my first novel *Winter Eyes*, whose title is a sort of pun.

Looking back, this was a wildly ambitious choice no matter how many times I'd listened to it sung by different artists, whether baritones like Thomas Quasthoff or tenors like Ian Bostridge. But Natalie was game, and we worked on it for a few weeks before I discovered a Swedish art song that was much easier.

I spoke good enough German but learned quickly that singing in a language was much different than speaking it. Vowels weren't necessarily pronounced the same way, and the consonants I had worked so hard at getting right actually stopped sound. Natalie often had me sing the vowels of a phrase rather than the real words, and that was one of the many exercises I did at home.

I went looking for something Swedish because of the chance I'd be teaching a summer program there, and I thought that learning to sing in Swedish would be another way of assimilating the language. I also had fantasies of arranging to sing it there for my faculty contacts.

The deeper I got into "I Skogen," (The Woods), the more natural it felt. The melodic, haunting song was about someone wandering into the woods at dusk, inhaling the perfume of flowers and listening to a nightingale and hoping for peace. It's not explicit why he needs to find solace in nature, but it felt like a song of thwarted love to me. And it was short—only two pages!

Barbara Bonnie had recorded it on an album of Scandinavian art songs, and she said it was the "most perfect song from Scandinavia ever written." Luckily I didn't know the status it had out in the world, or I might not have taken it on.

Natalie and I talked about what the words meant, about emotion in the song, about the feelings I associated with it, but that was just part of the challenge and part of the fun. Our main work together was drilling down into every word, every vowel to make them sound right, which we could do because Natalie's brother-in-law was Swedish, and I had CDs and books to consult.

I sometimes found myself instructing her, which was a neat twist. Our intense focus on what might seem like minutiae was fascinating and rewarding. Being able to perfect just one small part of that song felt like a great achievement for me as a newcomer to this world of voice.

Not that we did that much singing in the beginning. Most of our half-hour lessons were warm-ups and exercises of various kinds (with some chatting). I picked half-hour lessons though I could have gone for 45 minutes or a full hour because I didn't think I had the stamina for anything more. I didn't realize then that I was afraid of singing by myself for that long a time. I would be too exposed.

Natalie liked to start me going down into my lower register, and the very first concept she introduced me to was "space." She kept offering me images to explain it. "Think of the inside of your mouth like a balloon."

I must have grimaced because she switched to "Have you ever been in a beautiful big European cathedral? Think of the dome." I got that instantly because I had been in several, and the Duomo in Florence was especially memorable since I'd seen it again not that long before I started lessons. The metaphors kept coming.

"Aim your sound as if you're throwing a dart at the wall."

"Imagine there's a ribbon unspooling, or your sound is like a beautiful scarf a magician is drawing from nowhere."

"There's a string pulling your head to the ceiling."

Amid all this imagery, I was learning to breathe from my belly, keep my chin level to avoid cutting off the sound, relax and open my mouth more widely, not lift my shoulders, and remember my foundation.

My what?

I was a tree. I was rooted in the ground. I was solid. Natalie said whatever image worked, I needed to think of my whole body engaged in singing and supporting my sound. There was so much to learn that needed to become second nature, part of me, unconscious, and yet at times, I felt like a poorly built house of cards.

Or that I was attempting a yoga position beyond my abilities—the infamous headstand that I could never accomplish no matter how hard I tried in my wonderful yoga classes. This is why small victories, small changes meant a lot to me, and so did being able to laugh at my mistakes.

But I wasn't laughing whenever Natalie wanted to correct something and had me sing in front of the full-length mirror I hadn't noticed the first day I was there. That was truly mortifying, even if it was instructive. Yikes—that was me, my mouth agape, trying to sing. I looked so ungainly and foolish that I couldn't hear myself right. Shame almost blinded and deafened me. But then I wasn't supposed to be listening; I was supposed to *let go*.

So many instructions. . . What did it feel like Natalie kept asking, and eventually, I was able to focus on and experience what I was feeling when I sang a scale or whatever we were doing.

Sometimes I felt the sound in the front of my face (“the “mask), sometimes my whole head seemed to vibrate or have an aura, sometimes I felt it in my chest and up into my head. And I began to notice a connection between her “Very nice!” and the sound feeling more open. I could also hear that when I played back the lessons I recorded, but I also felt it all over again if I listened with headphones which made the experience more immediate.

Listening to myself on my iPad wasn't always helpful, though, and sometimes made me cringe. I followed the exercises, but I had to screen out that I often sounded sour—to my ears, anyway. A later instructor would tell me that no tablet could pick up everything I was singing, so there would always be distortion of some kind when I played the lesson back. But I didn't know that starting out and wasn't prepared.

All the same, my practice between lessons quickly took on a fulfilling routine: listening to the lesson, working on the new exercises, working on whatever part of the song we had picked and picked apart, listening to singers on YouTube or a CD, and even reading about voice. I didn't force myself to sing every day because I would have hated it, but some weeks I did because I was enjoying myself so much.

And though lessons could unexpectedly make me nervous and embarrassed to some extent each time, underneath all that, I had a sense that something was waiting for me: a zone of peace, someplace quiet and reflective right there in that little room, right there inside my body. I heard the words over and over that, for a singer, the difficulty always was that they were the instrument, and I didn't quite get it, but I sensed that someday I might get it. No, not just get it. Live it, breathe it, *be it*.

If I got frustrated, it didn't last, since the lessons were only half an hour and there was always hope I'd do better next time.

And I was actually glad that I hadn't started cello lessons. I realized that the logistics would have been much harder than just bringing music and an iPad to a lesson. Where in my house would we have put an instrument of that size? How would I be able to drag it from home to my lessons and back without injuring my back? I almost felt I'd weirdly gotten a reprieve thanks to needing hand surgery.

I told very few people that I was taking voice lessons, and I think I was trying to protect myself from failure, whatever that meant. I knew I was a good teacher and could reach and inspire students—I'd seen it happen.

I also knew I was a good performer of my own fiction and nonfiction at readings and could touch people with my words, not just on the page but in public. But could I ever achieve that level of competence *and* confidence through singing? I hadn't set any time limits on this project, but I was sixty years old, didn't have decades to develop my voice the way I'd developed my skills in the classroom and my craft as a writer.

I also kept this venture primarily to myself because I wanted something in my life that felt unconnected to everything else: all my work, my husband, family, you name it. I wanted a kind of retreat or safe space where I wouldn't be judging myself or exposing myself to the judgment of anyone else but my teacher. I especially recoiled from the idea of ever singing in public. I'd spent years in and out of book tours speaking and reading at universities, libraries, conferences, bookstores, and many other venues.

I had spoken endlessly, it seemed, about being the son of Holocaust survivors, about being gay and Jewish, and about the author's life itself. All of that was exciting but also exhausting because I committed myself to it ultimately. I was reluctant to let voice somehow become part of my public life, especially since I was indeed a novice.

Singing in a chorus had not prepared me for singing solo, for the sense of exposure and even danger. Sing for other people? There would be nowhere to hide.

And then one day, as I was leaving my lesson, the next student, a petite woman who was easily half my age, smiled at me and said, "I heard you in there. You have a lovely voice."

This wasn't a teacher trying to give me courage: this was a total stranger. I was startled by her compliment—and thrilled. What a gift she gave me.

And what a gift I ended up giving myself by exploring something way outside my comfort zone, a gift that's brought me tremendous and abiding joy.

I have a voice.

[Lev Raphael](https://www.levraphael.com/) *Link: (https://www.levraphael.com/)* coaches, mentors, and edits writers, and is the author of 27 books in genres ranging from memoir to mystery, with his most recent title, *Department of Death*. *Link: (https://healthyaging.net/magazine/winter-2022/bookshelf-winter-2022/)*