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Giselle Wyers interviews Sandra Snow, one of our 2010 Summer Institute guest presenters

by Giselle Wyers, R & S Chair for Youth and Student Activities, WA ACDA



You work at Michigan State University: Tell us a bit about the teaching you do, how long have been teaching there, etc?

This is my fifth year at Michigan State University and I have a dual position in conducting and music education. I conduct the MSU Womens Chamber Ensemble, created when I came to MSU. I teach graduate and undergraduate conducting, choral pedagogy, and graduate coursework in music education. One of the unexpected pleasures has been teaching the introduction to music education course for freshman. There is something intoxicating about the sheer passion these students have about the idea of teaching and it keeps me in touch with my own reasons for this life choice.



Are you still working with childrens choirs, as well?

No, though we have an exceptional childrens choir in residence conducted by Kristin Zaryski. My son sings for her and it is breathtaking to witness one's own child come into their voice and sense of self. I still do a fair amount of children's honor choirs, most recently the ACDA Southern Division Children's Honor Choir and I've had a long and fruitful relationship with the Pacific International Children's Choir Festival as a regular conductor in that format.

Do you have any special ties to the Puget Sound region- summer is pretty nice here weather wise What are you looking forward to about the summer session?

My ties to the area are slim so I am very happy to be invited to beautiful Washington. I did do doctoral work at the same time as Marc Hafso ((WA ACDA President) and, in fact, our six year old daughter is named for one of his children. And, of course, I'm looking forward to seafood!

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What are some of the topics you plan to cover at the upcoming summer session in Tacoma?

The summer session environment is so relaxing, isn't it? I enjoy presenting in this format when the sessions are small enough to feel more conversational than institutional. Jonathan (Reed) and I are doing several joint sessions, one on advancing vocalism in the male and female voice as well as a conducting masterclass. I will also take up the issue of imagination in teaching, how we can continue to grow our practice as conductor/teachers.

What are teachable moments in rehearsal? Can they be cultivated or is it more a matter of capitalizing on them when they occur spontaneously?

Teachable moments are those fluid opportunities in rehearsal to set aside personal goals in order to listen, receive, and respond to singers in an authentic way. The conditions for teachable moments can be cultivated by an ethos of trust. Trust can be gained when singers believe or understand a conductor/teacher is more about their experience than goals of perfection. It is ironic, isn't it, that the most compelling and moving performances may have reached a high level of proficiency but it is the soulfulness of the singers that communicates.

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Tell me more about what you mean by developing diagnostic rehearsal strategies.

I'll work on this concept in one of the interest sessions. Basically, I maintain that rehearsal strategies are embedded right in the musical DNA of a composition and that what and how we choose to teach the ideas are in direct relationship to the experiences and needs of the singers with which we work. I talk about conducting/teaching as a rich form of improvisation. Improvisation is creative work of the mind and the richer the thinking and decision-making, the more spontaneous and joyful our work becomes.

What is the one thing you think teachers should emphasize more when it comes to the question of empowering a student's full musical potential.

Expect more, press less.

How much is gesture a part of the picture for you, as you describe rehearsal strategies?

Gesture is our most powerful teaching tool. It is astounding enough the difference in vocal sound that can be achieved by communicative gesture but even more so to realize that our gesture has an impact on the very self-identity

of a choir. Issues of control (or release of control), trust, and motive are translated through our body work as conductors.

Can you summarize a bit about your publication In High Voice?

In High Voice is one of the series in the wider Boosey & Hawkes holdings developed by Doreen Rao. *In High Voice* targets developing and advanced womens choirs, distinguished by the quality of composition but also by the interaction with texts and ideas that reflect the complexity of women's experiences.

What are some of the challenges and rewards that you have found from working with younger singers such as your work with the Glen Ellyn Children's Chorus?

Working with children taught me both the craft of teaching and how to work at the most basic level to build vocalism. I believe those years with the *Glen Ellyn Children's Chorus* were my best education and like many teachers, feel badly for what I must have put them through as they taught me what was effective! If one can develop a beautiful instrument in a child, one can shape vocalism at any level. It's just the most pure experience!

Describe your personal style of leading rehearsal and engaging singers, especially middle school and high school aged singers. From your experience what is it that students need the most right now? Musicianship? Heart, a sense of connection? Better repertoire?

Great question. I like the word engage very much. It has more vitality than facilitate without projecting my personality on a choir. To engage is to set the conditions for success and that means understanding where singers are coming from (musically and personally) and shaping experiences that are relevant. Great repertoire, absolutely, they deserve it Musicianship, what a joy when they can take ownership of musical ideas. Heart and a sense of connection...why do we sing in the first place? We sing to feel the most alive, the most vibrant, the most spiritual, and the most complete. We don't sing to learn concepts for concepts sake, solfege for solfege sake, vowels for vowels sake, or even music for music's sake. We sing because to be expressive is at the core one of the essential experiences of the human condition.

You have a lovely gestural vocabulary. Who were your conducting teachers and who continues to inspire you in the field?

Thank you! I have had such wonderful mentors who continue to inspire me. I studied first with Hilary Apfelstadt, one of the few women working at that level at the time. I became deeply involved in Doreen Rao's *Choral Music Experience Institute* and found great synergy with other colleagues, particularly composers. I learned more than I can say from Dr. Charles Smith, then Director of Choral

Programs at Michigan State University. Aside from his superb gesture, I learned to consider text much more deeply than I had before and it in turn transformed my ideas about musical phrasing. I spent seven wonderful years at University of Michigan where my colleague Jerry Blackstone inspired me daily and who actively mentored me into the ways of collegiate teaching.

As for the present, my students, present and former, inspire me. It is a great privilege to watch a teacher take wings and fly.

What composers, especially American composers, interest you? How do you sift through the chaff to find the good stuff? What recommendations do you have for teachers looking for affordable but high quality repertoire for their programs?

A tough question, as I'm interested in so many musics. I love the music of Daniel Brewbaker, a composer who in my opinion is surprisingly unknown. The state of Minnesota seems to grow exceptional composers! The young crowd, Jocelyn Hagen, Abbie Betinis, Andrea Ramsey, among others will contribute new voices to the repertoire.

At MSU, we have made the tough decision to require students to purchase their choral music as textbooks. We simply couldn't sustain the high cost of repertoire. The obvious disadvantage is that we are not building a choral library as we did in the past, but this kind of arrangement will no doubt be the wave of the future. We also use CPDL with regularity.