

Treasures from the Archives...Sweet Briar Alumnae Magazine (1988)

## Liberal Arts and the Performing Arts

by Ann Tedards '70



Artists frequently are asked how they came to do what they do. My answer begins with my freshman year audition for the Sweet Briar Choir when Mr. Gilpin asked me if I had ever had voice lessons and would I like to study. I said no, I hadn't and yes, I would be interested, but how much would lessons cost? Upon learning that voice lessons cost the same amount as riding, which my parents had given me permission to take, I called home to ask if I might trade horses for voice.

Well, I never got on a horse at Sweet Briar, not because I couldn't find the time but because Gil had opened a door into a world which has fascinated, compelled and challenged me to my limits ever since. I am eternally grateful and indebted to this optimistic, knowledgeable little man who was my first voice teacher. Gil knew how to nurture a young voice - how to lay a technical foundation which could function as a yard stick through the subsequent ups and downs of a maturing voice. His ideals of sound

became and have remained mine over 18 years of constant change and growth. I'm not sure how many of my colleagues can say that about *their* first voice teachers! For me, Gil was the initial stroke of professional good fortune.

In spite of this instant attraction to the study of singing, my association with it had begun as an extracurricular activity and I was to face an inner conflict over the declaration of an academic major. I delayed the decision as long as possible, but finally at the end of sophomore year, time had run out. I needed help. I asked for an appointment with Dean Sims, who helped me to see that my talent had emerged and been recognized and that a major in voice was the logical course to take.

I must admit, though, that even after a graduate degree, 16 years of professional performance and a year as an assistant professor of voice at the University of Oregon, I still am not convinced that musical performance studies belong in the academic realm. It seems logical and natural to offer academic degrees in the performing arts only when the study is part of a larger concept, that of the humanities and liberal arts, rather than an isolated specialization, devoid of cultural, social and historical perspective. I worry about non-Sweet Briar-like churning out of music students who have learned their conducting beat patterns, know how to play major and minor scales on seven instruments and can sing a few Art Songs in rudimentary Italian, German and French, but have little idea about the place music has held and holds in the "collective unconscious" (to borrow from Jung) of the human race. I do not mean to say that serious and arduous study of the discipline is not required, but the crossover into "extracurricular: is problematic in most academic institutions and my observation is that the problem has been skirted rather than faced head-on.

But back to "How did you come to do what you do?" "Long answer" mode is upon me: I feel compelled to talk about why my connection to the art of singing was so immediate and intense. In fact, studying and performing the classical vocal repertoire draws together an array of interests which otherwise might remain separate areas – music, foreign languages, movement (Sports and dance), poetry and drama and international relations. During my formative years, music always was a part of my life. I studied piano (albeit sometimes reluctantly) for about six years and sang in every church and school choir and ensemble possible. Languages were a special interest, perhaps due to growing up as an Air Force child living abroad off and on. In high school I organized a French Club and did special projects at the local university in Russian Studies. Sports were a big part of my life (eight years of field hockey, tennis since the age of ten, basketball, and softball - everything available to a girl growing up in the '60s). Poetry and drama came later, but observing my mother teach high school speech, drama and

English and direct plays was certainly an influence. And international relations? That was my other choice of academic major! (I ended up with an undeclared double major, completing course work for an A.B. in international affairs and harboring a secret desire to attend law school and work in the field of international law.) I was a young person, not unlike many others, whose interests were varied and potentially conflicting. It didn't help to be named "Best All-Round" at high school graduation – I wanted someone to tell me *what to do* with my life.

With the first voice lesson, I think that I realized that I could draw it all together – music, foreign languages (Italian, French, German, and Russian), movement (physical coordination and rhythm, strength, stamina, concentration), poetry, and drama (linked with languages and the universality of music, not to mention the ensuing professional opportunities for travel and temporary expatriotism). I found a discipline which could afford me the opportunity to explore multiple interests, rather than force me to narrow my focus. The fact that I was attending an institution that required a solid liberal arts course of study enabled me to interweave my interests – a process I have continued to enjoy all the years following my formal education and which I believe has contributed to my overall success as an interpreter of music.



My career as a singer has taken me places I never dreamed I would go. Initially, my strong interest in the area of early music performance practice culminated in a professional engagement with the *New York Pro Musica Antiqua*, which included three national tours and concert series at both Alive Tully Hall and the Cloisters. When the Pro Musica folded in 1974, I was left “high and dry” in New York City, but managed to scrape through as a free-lance singer for several years, building my repertoire and singing professional chorus gigs under some of the world’s finest conductors, among them Bernstein, Boulez and Solti. As my voice matured, I acquired a curiosity about opera ( an area that was a bit underplayed at SBC) and began attending acting master classes for opera singers, held by the late Mat soprano Judith Raskin at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y. In 1978 I was admitted to the International Opera Studio in Zurich, but chose instead to attend the summer American Institute of Musical Studies in Graz, Austria, because it lasted only two months and offered similar training (teaching the American singer about a career in Europe). Towards the end of the summer, agents came to hear us and suddenly I was engaged for the approaching season at the opera house in Ulm, West Germany, with no time to return to New York or a supply of winter clothes! I stayed in Ulm for a year, but declined a reengagement for a second year and moved to another house in Klagenfurt, Austria. That year I entered international voice competitions and was thrilled to win the Mozart Prize in Barcelona, Spain. After two and a half years in provincial Austria I decided to return to a cultural metropolis, moved to Vienna and studied with a voice teacher there. Shortly after my arrival the Austrian Radio engaged me to sing a contemporary work scored for orchestra and baritone and soprano solos (composer: Wolfgang Rihm; text: Friedrich Nietzsche). After the concert I was approached by a representative from one of the major European concert agents and through them received the bulk of my engagements for the ensuing five years. I truly had a marvelous time living in Vienna and appearing as a soloist with the Vienna Symphony, the Austrian Radio Orchestra, the Vienna Boys Choir and various chamber ensembles performing music from the Baroque to music hot off the press. Concert tours took me to Italy, Germany, Bulgaria, Spain, The Netherlands, France and Greece – nice opportunities for a person interested in other languages and cultures and international politics.

Toward the end of 1986 I began to feel uncomfortable about living abroad. I had met a few American singers who, having completed their professional careers in Europe, were feeling homesick for the United States in their retirement. I thought that I would prefer to make that adjustment earlier and began to investigate possible avenues for returning to the U.S.A. The Washington Opera hired me for its production of *The Coronation of Poppea* in the winter of 1987. While singing in Washington I sent some applications to universities which had advertised openings on their voice faculties. No sooner had I

returned to Vienna than the University of Oregon telephoned with an invitation to interview. So, back to the states I went – this time all the way across, to the Pacific Northwest, for the first time in my life. When the job was offered, I swallowed hard, said farewell to my Bohemian life in Europe and came home.

I often hear the observation made that I am not a “typical soprano.” And when I was living in Europe, people sometimes remarked that I was not a “typical” American. Either I have successfully dodged the pigeonhole syndrome or I am simply by nature a global, eclectic sort who landed in a time and society bent on intense specialization and political nationalism. Or perhaps the ways in which my Sweet Briar experiences influenced my life make me atypical. Whatever the reasons, being a musician has afforded me the luxury of choosing my own distance from the mainstream. This luxury comes with some trade-offs, of course – lack of job security, for one – but if living on the edge is attractive to a person, then a career in the arts is a good route to take.



*After graduating from Sweet Briar with a major in voice, Ann Tedards earned the M.M. in voice from the UNC-Chapel Hill in 1972 and began her career as a professional singer. She is the author of a biography of Marian Anderson, published in 1986 by Chelsea House Publishers (NYC) as part of a series of books entitled "American Women of Achievement." Since 1987 Ann has been an assistant professor of voice at the University of Oregon. She continues to perform professionally, both in this country and abroad.*