



Singing Lessons

MARIANNA CRANE still thrills to the sound of music

I called Dr. Brown when I was finally alone in the office. His voice was deep and rich, perfectly intimidating. My palms were wet as I clutched the receiver.

“I saw your notice on the bulletin board at work by the elevators,” I said. “I am interested in taking singing lessons.”

“Do you sing?”

“In the shower,” I joked feebly.

“Why do you want to take lessons?” he asked.

“A friend and I have made a pact to take lessons. We want to

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put together a show, a presentation. We are both nurses. The presentation will be for people in nursing homes. I want to learn how to sing properly, have breath control so I can sing without

running out of steam,” I said with authority I didn’t feel.

He agreed to see me and set a time and date for our first meeting. I hung up the phone quietly, my palms still damp.

Shut off the computer; quick strip to the bathroom, again. I do not want to be late for my first singing lesson. In the bathroom mirror I see my newly cropped white hair feathered around an undeniably older face. Singing lessons. Am I crazy? I smooth out my mauve tercel jumper, which is fashionably long. I work with younger people who set my fashion statement higher than my less-than-chic style. No one at work knows I am going for singing lessons. Secrecy protects my reputation as a professional and mature woman. Reality is that I don’t want to tell people that I was turned away if the voice teacher decides I am just not up to the quality he expects in a pupil. I can see him looking at me after I do whatever exercise he gives me to assess my voice. He will look displeased. He will frown and look down at the floor trying to compose himself. I will shift from foot to foot, as I stand in front of him. Finally, he will let me have it: “You have no talent, no ear for music. You are hopeless. Go home and bake cookies. Do not think

you are a singer!" Eyes down, shoulders hunched, I will creep back into middle age.

This decision to take singing lessons comes from an old inner itch and a pact with a crazy friend, Lois, who will take voice lessons, also, miles away in another state. Lois and I have shared many interests. We are both nurses and have dissimilar backgrounds but common passions. Threaded through our friendship of over 25 years is our love of music. Lois plays the piano and once dabbled with the guitar, I played the guitar, and we both think we can sing. On a recent visit, Lois, the minister's daughter, played the keyboard cast-off by my son. We harmonized to "Amazing Grace," "How Great Thou Art," and "Take My Hand, Precious Lord." That's when we hatched our plan.

When I was in Sister Maria's sixth-grade class for girls, I sang in the choir. Every Sunday Sister Maria conducted the choir at the 10:00 a.m. mass. She was a little, wired-up woman who was greatly feared by the student body. In her full white nun's dress, black veil flowing, she could hydroplane across the schoolyard and whack some unsuspecting offender on the side of the head before he even realized what he was doing was wrong.

At the beginning of the school

year she required each girl in her class to stand up and sing a couple of bars of "Ave Maria." Then she would nod her heavy veiled head "yes" or "no." When my turn came, I stood up stiffly by the side of the big wooden desk and sang out strongly. The nod: "yes."

When I left sixth grade, I asked my mother if I could have singing lessons. I see myself standing next to the faded red Formica table in the kitchen of our second-floor walk-up apartment. My mother is at the sink, drying her hands with a towel. She asks me to sing for her. Sunshine from the only window in the kitchen lies in quarters on the floor in front of me. I focus on the brightness to still my nervousness. I do not remember what I sang. Probably "Ave Maria." I don't remember what my mother said. I never did get singing lessons.

At work one morning last week, I read a notice on the bulletin board by elevators I rarely take. Voice teacher Victor Brown, PhD, taught "breath control, diction, voice placement, and resonance as well as voice expression, style, and stage deportment." Best of all, he took beginners. This was an omen.

"You must be Ms. Crane," he says in his perfect, deep, modulated voice as he opens the screen door.



UPCOMING EVENTS

Thurs., May 1, 10 & 11:30 am
Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, presented by SignStage Theatre Company
School Show Series

Sat., May 3, 8:00 pm
Stillhouse Bottom Band
Old-time music

Sat., May 3, 8:00 pm (West End)
The Lascivious Biddies
All-girl quartet from NYC

Friday, May 9, 6-9 pm
C/H/C'boro 2nd Friday Art Walk

Monday, May 12, 10 & 11:30 a.m.
Fly Dance Company
School Show Series

May 14-17, 21-24, 8 pm
May 18, 3 p.m.
Alice Neel, by Anne Marie Oliva
New World Stage PlayFactory

Saturday, May 17, 8 pm
Transactors Experimental Theater

Saturday, May 31, 11 am
Paul Hadfield as SPATS
SuperFun for Kids Series

The ArtsCenter 300-G E. Main Street Carrboro, NC 27510 919/929-2787

“If I can see myself as a singer I would be a cabaret singer,” I say.

I arrive at his house. The scent of jasmine follows me as I step on the uneven slate path wondering what the hell I am doing here. How crazy I am to go along with Lois’ wild ideas. I walk down a couple of steps and face the front door. Close up, the red trim is chipped, the white paint flakes, and there is a small tear in the screen door. I hit the white plastic doorbell but hear nothing. Before I can decide if I should knock or turn away, a man opens the door. We stare eyeball to eyeball through the screen. “You must be Ms. Crane,” he says in his perfect, deep, modulated voice as he opens the screen door. His ramrod straight body is clothed in a white crumpled T-shirt and shorts.

I struggle with the door handle that somehow enmeshes itself with my backpack, finally freeing my right arm to shake his outstretched hand. He points me to an open door. At the bottom of the stairs I confront a massive grand piano monopolizing a long, narrow room. A little folding chair is alongside it. It is here that he motions me to sit.

As he sits stiffly erect at the piano, he asks me again if I ever had lessons?

“No”

“Have you done much singing?”

“Only in the shower.”

“What kind of singing do you want to do?”

I again tell him what I said over the telephone when I first called, only this time it is for real. He is real teacher and I am in his house getting a real singing lesson.

“If I can see myself as a singer I would be a cabaret singer,” I say. I thought this up in the short car trip over here. I need some singer identity.

“Well, let’s see what your voice range is. I will put you through some exercises.” He



Marianna Crane is a nurse practitioner who lives in Chapel Hill. She is working on a book of nursing stories.

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arches his fingers over the white keys.

Just what I thought would happen, I say to myself, feeling damp all over. He proceeds to have me do the *la la la la* I have seen opera singers do when practicing in old movies.

At first I impress by following his lead.

“You have done this before?” His eyebrows arch and dark eyes widen.

I assure him I haven’t — too many old movies, probably.

Soon I convince him I know nothing. I cannot follow his pitch. My palms sweat and my breath is so erratic that I begin to feel lightheaded.

“Why don’t you sing one of the songs you sing in the shower for me? Just get up at the crook of the piano and entertain me.”

My god, my legs are water. I manage to stand and walk to where I think a crook of a piano should be. I try to stand like a cabaret singer, back straight with my arms resting on the piano top. I can’t look at him so I focus on the window at the back of the room. I vacillate on which of the many songs in my repertoire I will sing. My heart pounds in my ears, blotting out memory.

Patience is his strength.

“Summertime,” I finally say.

“All right,” he says, his face flat.

It is obvious to me I will not have any accompaniment. I sing. I hear a weak, wobbly voice. He tells me to try the song at a higher range and loudly. I try again. Funny. I am forgetting the words. Again he stops me and pings a note on the piano.

“Try to sing in this key.”

Surprisingly, I hit the note and somehow my voice rises and swells. “Fish are jumping and the cotton is high ...” My voice is going to the end of the room. It is warm and rich to my ears. I hear a break but I don’t care; I just keep singing. I don’t remember how much I have sung but when I stop and look over at him, he is smiling. My palms are dry. •



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