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Berklee College of Music's
Jan Shapiro

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Music for Beginning
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UpClose

Jan Shapiro

Shaping Berklee's Voice Department

BY CHRISTIAN WISSMULLER

Prior to heading the Voice Department at Berklee College of Music, Jan Shapiro had already cut an impressive figure as a performer, singing at such high-profile venues as the Playboy Club in St. Louis, the Top of the Tower Club in NYC, and the Camellia Room in Chicago's Drake Hotel.

Shapiro taught voice privately and was also a faculty member at Fontbonne College, St. Louis and in the Jazz Studies Department at Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, Ill. Additionally, she has released a number of albums and performed as a studio vocalist for advertising jingles and television spots.



Since coming to Boston in 1985, Shapiro has personally instructed a number of high-profile Berklee alums and, as chair of the Voice Department since the late '90s, she has helped to grow the department, enhance its stature, and sharpen its focus.

CD recently had the opportunity to speak with Ms. Shapiro about the voice program at Berklee, her thoughts on how choral directors can help their students better prepare for college study, and her own plans for the future.

CD: Let's start at the beginning – how long have you been teaching music?

Jan Shapiro: I came to Berklee in 1985, but prior to that I taught at Southern Illinois University in Edwardsville and Fontbonne College in St. Louis. I guess I've been teaching for at least 25 years, but I didn't really concentrate on education, full-time, until Berklee brought me here.

CD: How did you end up at Berklee College of Music?

JS: In the '80s, I was doing a lot of singing and gigging in the St. Louis area, usually working six or seven nights a week. A colleague of mine who taught jazz studies at the Southern Illinois campus said, "Jan, I saw this ad from Berklee and you'd be perfect for this position they have available." I laughed and figured that Berklee would never take me because, though I was well known in my local area, I wasn't on a major recording label and wasn't that prominent, nationally. But I went ahead and applied, anyway, and Berklee called me and brought me up to Boston for an interview.

CD: And you took the gig.

JS: Actually, no – at least, not right away. They did offer me the job, but I ended up declining because I really enjoyed what I was doing in St. Louis. I was making a very good living, and my whole life was based there.

CD: Obviously something happened after that.

JS: Yes. The next year, there was a change of administration at Berklee, but the chair of the Voice Department, Ken Greenhouse, remained and he called me

back and made an even better job offer, which I did accept.

CD: Initially were you part-time or full-time at Berklee?

JS: I was hired as a full-time voice teacher.

CD: When – and how – did you make the transition from voice teacher to chair of the entire department?

JS: I became chair in about 1998, I believe. It's a little difficult to pinpoint the exact date, because first I was acting chair and then I had to go through the whole presentation process, and there was a national search to fill the position.

CD: Really? Even though you'd been there for a while and were acting chair, you weren't automatically offered the job?

JS: Oh, it wasn't easy – it wasn't a shoo-in, or a given, by any stretch.

CD: Can you talk about the differences in the Voice Department between when you first became chair and now?

JS: During that time, there were only 13 or 14 voice teachers, total, and maybe 200 or 250 students – voice principals – in all. Now, I have about 35 voice faculty, I have an assistant chair, and an administrative coordinator. We have almost 750 voice principals now.

CD: That's quite a change in a relatively short span.

JS: Yes, well, I worked very hard at that!

CD: I know from my own experience at Berklee that it seemed that, second to guitar, whenever you asked someone what their principal instrument or major was, invariably the answer was: voice.

JS: That is certainly true, these days. We are the second-largest department to guitar, but we weren't when I first decided to take the job as chair.

CD: Of course, growth of the sort we're discussing doesn't "just happen." How has the department changed since you arrived at Berklee?

JS: When I first started back in the '80s, everything was just called "repertoire." There weren't many classes that would be linked, one to another, with a beginner level pro-

gressing to another level and then to another level, and so on.

On top of that, instruction wasn't specialized for specific vocal styles. Course offerings were much more "overall" in nature – not that it wasn't good, it was just more generalized.

Now, we have special ensembles that singers participate in with a rhythm section, or they take an ensemble section, if they're ready for that. These days we offer instruction in pop, rock, country, rhythm & blues, jazz – just about everything.

CD: Does Berklee also offer instruction in music of a more classical, traditional nature?

JS: Certainly. We have teachers that are classical instructors, as well. Our curriculum is primarily designed for contemporary music and classical is really the basis for everything that came afterwards. In the first four semesters, we focus on building good vocal technique and vocal health. Those skills are then incorporated into all the styles.

We also spend a lot of time training students here to learn about background singing because that is a very viable part of a professional career, whether it be singing backup behind major artists or singing in the studio, but that's all contemporary music, contemporary grooves. They audition well and can do all sorts of background singing.

CD: With all the responsibilities that go along with being chair, have you had to cut back on actual teaching?

JS: Oh, yes. For a while, I taught one class and co-taught another. I'd also teach private lessons. Now, I mostly only teach one class and individual lessons.

CD: As an educator, what's the most rewarding aspect of the job for you?

JS: The most rewarding experience is to work with a talented singer who is a diamond in the rough – someone who not only has talent, but also the enthusiasm to work really hard and do something great with that talent. The reward for me is to help nurture that individual's development and to be able to watch how that singer progresses.

CD: I know that many Berklee grads have achieved great things in the industry – Have any of your former students gone on to become major players?

Jan Shapiro at a Glance

Education: Bachelor's degree, Cum Laude from Howard University, Washington D.C.; Masters degree from Cambridge College, Cambridge, Mass.

Teaching Career: faculty member at Fontbonne College, St. Louis; Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, Ill.; Berklee College of Music, Boston, Mass.

Performance Highlights: Guest vocalist for the Boston Globe Jazz Festival in 1987 and in 1990, leading off the Festival in 1990; appearances at prominent national venues and festivals.

Recording Highlights: Featured guest artist with the "Airmen of Note" – the official Jazz Ensemble of the United States Air Force, *Read Between the Lines* (1997), *Not Commercial* (1998), and *Boswellmania* (2000, w/ Adriana Balic and Lisa Thorson).

Web site: www.janshapiro.com

Jan with keyboardist Greg Pillinganes



groups, starting with the likes of the Mills Brothers and the Boswell Sisters, learning the history and taking exact oral transcriptions.

Some students just form together, take the initiative, and make up their own groups.

CD: Do most performing groups sing at Berklee venues, or outside of the school?

JS: Some outside, some not. The BPC [Berklee Performance Center] or any of the many recital halls here are good, accessible, and available venues.

CD: Can you give me an example of what a "standard" freshman voice major might be looking at in first semester?

JS: Many times a basic freshman is going to take an ensemble that features solo voice with rhythm section, a Styles Lab where they'll choose between pop/rock, rhythm & blues, or jazz, and then, if their ear-training is advanced, a sight-reading

lab. Or if they're still too much of a beginner, they'll take Ear Training I, as well as Performance Skills for the Background Singer. Again, that'd have them working in small groups of three to five, learning how to sing harmony backing vocals in all kinds of contemporary grooves.

CD: How do you approach grading - is it purely based on ability?

JS: Well, for individual lessons we adhere to a syllabi, so it's pretty spelled-out, but then students take a final exam

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and certainly you also have to look at vocal progress, so those are the primary factors to consider when grading: craft and progress.

CD: What do you consider to be the most challenging aspect of your job?

"It's important to recognize that it's not *just* singing in a choir that's going to help a vocalist in the long run."

I guess I'd have to say: trying to remain calm, while multitasking and trying to solve problems and issues in a fair manner.

CD: How about the most exciting part?

JS: Well, as we discussed, as an instructor the most exciting part is hearing someone that is just a natural singer, who has the talent, and being able to bring that student to the next level.

As chair, it's exciting to be able to attract talented vocalists who are serious about what they want to do and then to hear about their successes after completing studies at Berklee. Knowing that we, as a whole department, were able to influence students for the better is very exciting.

CD: You're an accomplished performer and educator and you've been instrumental in shaping the current state of one of the nation's most respected Voice Departments - what goals are left for you?

JS: On a personal level, I really was a woman with a mission: I wanted to create a strong curriculum for our vocalists in contemporary styles. I wanted to bring expert faculty in who really knew the relevant styles of music. I hope to continue on that path and make sure that we educate our vocal students as to what's required in order to succeed in the music business today.

I think we always have to update our approaches. A major part of what we do will, of course, always focus on good

technique and fundamentals, but teaching concepts about American music needs to continually change with the

times and we have to investigate how best to achieve that.

Because I've dedicated all these years as chair, working towards building a very strong department that has a very good reputation, I haven't been able to as creative, individually, as I'd like. I miss not being able to sing as much, myself, and I'm still not at all ready to be put out to pasture! I'd like to have more time to pursue some more professional gigs and projects and I intend to do just that.



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