

# Anti-Fat Bias in the Singing Voice Studio, Part Two: How to Make a Size Inclusive Voice Studio

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## INTRODUCTION

**I**N THE PREVIOUS INSTALLMENT of this two-part article, “Anti-Fat Bias in the Singing Voice Studio, Part One: Culture and Context,”<sup>1</sup> the authors offered background information on the prevalence of fatness, the history of anti-fat bias, and the experiences of fat persons in health-care, employment, and educational settings. This context encouraged voice teachers to examine implicit anti-fat bias, one of the few remaining yet still widely tolerated cultural biases. Many believe that anti-fat bias can be justified by medical facts, but this belief requires an examination of the influence of money and the media. The authors continue to utilize a fat liberationist framework, rejecting the long held idea that fat bodies are problematic in the performing arts, and affirming that the performing arts industry must provide opportunities for talented and well trained people of every size to work and tell stories that reflect our diverse world.

In part two of this article the authors explore tangible pedagogic modifications to foster a sense of belonging for all voice students, including fat students. Micro-activism in the voice studio is a huge step toward systemic change, and it can have a profoundly positive impact on our students.

## HOW TO MAKE A MORE INCLUSIVE VOICE STUDIO

A size-inclusive voice studio can start with simply treating students of all sizes with the same respect—for their bodies, artistry, personality, and career potential. By empowering artists of all sizes to perform music that fits their voice and soul, we fill audition rooms with body-diverse excellence. How better to change the stage to reflect our world than to enable the very best artists to have their shot at careers?

We have identified four major categories of best practices that can help to reframe our pedagogy to foster a sense of belonging for fat singers: (1) dismantling implicit bias, (2) examining our teaching philosophies, (3) working inclusively in the studio, and (4) building the future that we want to see.

### Dismantling Implicit Bias

Charlesworth and Banaji measured that while all other implicit biases trended “toward neutrality,” implicit anti-fat bias rose 40% during 2004–2010. They

suggest that panic over the “obesity epidemic” is likely to blame, as is the false assumption that body weight is always within one’s control, while many other factors such as race or gender identity are not.<sup>2</sup> We have reached the point where no amount of marginalization is acceptable in our voice studios. Implicit bias is more insidious than explicit bias because, by definition, we are not aware of implicit bias. Therefore, it is important that we intentionally and systematically confront all anti-fat bias.

Uncoupling fitness from size is an important start to dismantling implicit bias. Fat people can be fit, and thin people can be unfit. Often, fat people are subjected to concerns about *fitness* or *health*, which is coded language for concerns about *fatness*. Do not assume anything about someone’s fitness regimen (or lack thereof) based on how they look. Some bodies that look fat are perfectly medically “healthy,” and many bodies that look thin are not medically “healthy.” Is exercise helpful for singers? Yes, unless there are medical restrictions. Because voice teachers are not medical doctors, prescribing fitness based on how someone looks is not in our scope of practice (more on that below). No student owes a voice teacher “fitness” or “health.”

It is important to state clearly that not all people want to be thin. As teachers, we should not make assumptions about what a student wants. Moreover, a student’s body is not ours to judge. Some fat people reach a point of acceptance whereby they do not wish for their lives to revolve around counting calories and logging exercise. It may be medically impossible for weight loss to occur, or they may have simply chosen not to define themselves by their size. A journey to accepting a body that is not in line with the mainstream media’s definition of beauty takes a lot of hard work and, frankly, a lot of courage. Living as our authentic selves is something we regularly celebrate, especially in journeys through sexual orientation or gender identity. Loving and accepting our own bodies, no matter their size, should be no different.

Choose words carefully and understand the difference between intent and impact. It is easy to have good intentions, especially when we are concerned about someone’s “health”; however, the impact of expressing concern for a fat person’s “health” is that it can hurt them, regardless of our intentions. Therefore, consider carefully if it is ever necessary for a voice teacher to bring

up a student’s weight in a voice lesson. Is it ever directly relevant to voice pedagogy?

### Examining our Teaching Philosophies

First, consider if our self-perception as voice teachers centers on being a “master” (master-apprentice model) or a “partner” (collaborative teaching model). The master-apprentice model has been in practice for centuries, but it is falling out of favor, especially in CCM voice pedagogy.<sup>3</sup> In the private sector, independent voice teachers have to be student-centered collaborative partners or students will simply take their business elsewhere. Universities are the last bastion of the master-apprentice structure, in part because students have little agency over choosing their teachers. Studies have shown that collaborative learning is extremely effective in 1:1 training models.<sup>4</sup> Envisioning ourselves as partners to our students can create a safe and effective learning atmosphere for students in marginalized groups.

Second, consider how much we want to commoditize our students. Currently, the performing arts industry is often unwelcoming to fat performers.<sup>5</sup> However, most voice students are not going to be huge industry stars, so they do not need to train under the shadow of the industry’s anti-fat bias. If we were to pressure our students into an unsustainable state of being to appease “the industry,” we would alienate and further marginalize those students. Ultimately, the industry must evolve beyond its fatphobic view of the world. In the meantime, we can work with our fat students as they are and shield them from the anti-fat bias of “the industry” during their voice lessons. Voice teachers must train for the future of the industry so that our students can grow up and make the performing arts better. For example, if no one had been willing to train deaf actors, we would never have experienced Deaf West Theatre’s groundbreaking productions, which function as “the artistic bridge between the Deaf and hearing worlds.”<sup>6</sup>

Finally, consider what is within our scope of practice as voice teachers. We are experts on the singing voice. Most of us are not also trained therapists, medical doctors, nutritionists, dieticians, personal trainers, or any other weight-related specialist. We do encounter questions from students on a wide range of topics that are beyond our scope of practice. However, we should

express to our students that we are not qualified to provide expert advice outside of singing topics. If the student wants to know something beyond our scope of practice, we can refer the student to an expert. This does not mean initiating a recommendation that a fat student should seek weight-related medical care. It means that, *only if asked*, we should refer the student to an appropriate expert.

### **Working Inclusively in the Studio**

#### *Talking with students*

There is currently no evidence that a fat body will function differently than a thin body when it comes to singing. Ideally, we are offering the same core pedagogy to all our students, and we should avoid “othering” our students in large bodies. When it comes to vocal function, we talk about bones, muscles, and other structural components. Just as we do not discuss breast tissue, there is no reason to discuss adipose tissue. If we sense that a student is experiencing something differently in their body, we can ask them about it. There is some anecdotal evidence to suggest that singers in fat bodies may have a decreased sense of interoception, particularly with core muscles. This is not due to being out of shape, but more likely has to do with internalized responses to fat trauma. For example, fat people are often instructed to suck in their tummies from a young age, and generally learn to treat their bodies as adversaries, interrupting the development of a connective relationship with one’s physical form. Teachers are encouraged to approach breath management strategies with curiosity, questions, and tools. Do not assume that a fat singer feels things the same or differently when compared to a thin singer. Further research is needed in this area.

We should let our students self-describe as fat, if they wish, and let them initiate any conversations about their bodies. Teachers do not need to define a student as fat when talking with them, which can unintentionally occur through positive reactions to weight loss. It may not be emotionally safe for fat students to hear comments on weight loss, body shape, or body size. This is because body neutrality is the goal. Fat students want to exist in their bodies without their bodies being the center of attention. If we want to compliment a student, it is safer to compliment an accessory or a style choice. In the same vein, voice teachers do not need to engage in

any kind of fat talk, diet talk, exercise talk, or assigning good and bad values to food. This can happen when we speak about ourselves, the teachers. For a thin person, these topics might pass as innocuous small talk, but for a fat person, these topics can evoke painful memories, past trauma, or disordered eating. Even with good intentions, we must consider the potential impact of our words upon our vulnerable students.

#### *Pedagogic touching*

Consider retiring the practice of pedagogic touching. This is a much bigger topic, worthy of its own in-depth discussion. For the sake of this article, we ask our colleagues to consider if touching is truly the *only* way to teach a concept. If we absolutely must use pedagogic touch, we must ask for consent first. However, in any type of graded setting (i.e., university voice lessons), there is a power dynamic at play; the teacher has power over the student. Because of this power disparity, the student can never give true, enthusiastic consent to be touched. Fat students are at an even greater disadvantage, as they are often already pushing their bodies beyond what is comfortable, and they encounter body objectification regularly. It would not be acceptable to stop using pedagogic touch on fat students while continuing to use it on thin students. Such an unequal practice would promote a damaging message that touching fat people is disturbing. All students deserve the same pedagogic experience in our studios.

Ceasing pedagogic touch is the safest choice to avoid causing further harm in the voice studio. A recent study by Maier et al. showed that “adults with a history of childhood maltreatment may exhibit exaggerated responses to interpersonal physical contact,” and even when touch was announced (a proxy for consent) the level of discomfort remained the same. The researchers assert that the brain is permanently altered by childhood trauma and that the aversion to touch is “a product of fundamentally altered sensory experiences.”<sup>7</sup> This study provides evidence that students of any size with a history of trauma could be triggered by pedagogic touch, even if the touch is announced, or “consent” is acquired. Since learning about the trauma history of our students is far beyond our scope of practice as voice teachers, the authors advocate strongly to stop pedagogic touching entirely.

### Accommodations

Include fat bodies in thinking through studio spaces, restrooms, concert halls, theaters, and waiting areas. Offer accommodations from the beginning. Though many people in fat bodies are physically able, sizeism and ableism often intersect in voice lessons. As already noted in Part One of this article, chairs without armrests are essential for a size-inclusive voice studio and waiting area. It is customary in voice lessons to have the student stand for the duration of the lesson. While this is fine for many singers, it is not inclusive of all people. Consider offering a chair for the student to use as needed and adjust sight lines and spacing to accommodate both standing and seated positions. When a student who is in a larger body has physical limitations, they are more likely to experience shame and stigma when others assume that the limitations are related to their weight. They may be less comfortable advocating for their physical needs, due to the anti-fat bias they have experienced in various facets of their lives. It is helpful to be explicit that the student is free to sit and stand as needed. Feel free to explain the benefits of standing to sing, while allowing the singer to choose their comfort level.

Reconsider the staple use of a full-length mirror that a student faces for the entire lesson. Not all students are comfortable looking at themselves in a mirror for an extended period. Some teachers may have noticed students becoming distracted by their appearance in the mirror, adjusting clothing, or primping, which may be signs of discomfort. A study conducted by Radell et al. found that collegiate ballet dancers who were taught with mirrors had a higher level of body dissatisfaction than those who were taught without mirrors. They also found that only the dancers from the mirrored classes lost weight during the study,<sup>8</sup> suggesting that the presence of mirrors contributes to “body surveillance.”<sup>9</sup> For students in larger bodies, looking into the mirror for an extended period could exacerbate body dysmorphia or activate eating disorders. Adding a covering for the mirror, which the student can choose to open or leave closed, is a great way to give all students agency in the space. As an alternative to the full-length mirror, a hand mirror can be very effective, and it allows students to focus on one area of the body at a time.

Think through physical practices in a voice lesson, such as stretching, using props, getting down onto the

floor, and so on. Will these physical demands work for our fat and/or less able students? Is there an accommodation we can offer that will make it easier for them? Consider weight limits on studio props. If we ask students to sit on an exercise ball, consider sourcing a ball with a high weight limit. Providing students of all sizes with an equivalent level of training is important and providing a tool that is inaccessible to fat students is unnecessarily othering and creates a disparity in service.

### Repertoire

Assigning repertoire is perhaps one of the most potent ways to empower our students. We can either affirm or limit a student through the songs we choose. As voice teachers, we are not beholden to the values of “the industry,” and we can think beyond physical “type.” There is no evidence that *Fach* is related to body size. There is no evidence that how old someone appears on stage is related to body size. Nevertheless, fat singers are often given repertoire for the friend roles, the mom roles, the witch roles, and the prostitute roles. In an age of a Black Christine (Emilie Kouatchou, *Phantom of the Opera*) and a wheelchair-using Ado Annie (Ali Stroker, *Oklahoma!*), it is time to discard character typing based on physical traits. While we are not casting in the voice studio, we are assigning repertoire that allows students to “try on” different roles. Instead of using physical traits to determine “type,” we could choose songs that reflect the students’ voice type, personality, preferences, strengths, and career goals. In our voice studios, we can create a space without limits due to body size. This is a simple, yet audaciously radical act of micro-activism.

### Building the Future that We Want to See

#### *Include size in our diversity and inclusion statement*

A voice studio inclusion statement functions as a signal to students that it is safe to be their authentic selves within our voice studios. However, size is often left out of the list of diversity traits named in many institutional inclusion statements. Benson, Robinson-Martin, and Naismith provided a sample inclusion statement for voice teachers in their 2022 article, reprinted below.

My voice studio is a safe space where you can fully express yourself without fear of being made to feel unwelcome or unsafe because of your race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, size, gender expression, immigration status,

socio-economic background, mental health, physical ability, neurodiversity, country of origin, cultural heritage, or native language. Though we may not always agree, we will respect each other's personhood and existence in order to build a strong community and sense of belonging for all.<sup>10</sup>

We can take these stated values even further by drawing attention in our classes to the milestones in inclusion that we are seeing in the world. Representation of performers in larger bodies is increasing in the musical theatre sector. Jade Jones, a fat, Black, queer actor, played Belle in *Beauty and the Beast* at the Olney Theatre, a professional regional theater in Maryland. Plus-size actress Beanie Feldstein played Fanny Brice in the Broadway revival of *Funny Girl*. Courtney Bowman, a plus-size Black performer, starred in *SIX* (Anne Boleyn) and *Legally Blonde* (Elle) on the West End and at Regent Park, respectively. Jaquel Spivey made his professional debut in *A Strange Loop* on Broadway and was nominated for a Tony Award for Best Leading Actor in a Musical for playing a role that directly deals with fatness without pathologizing or overfocusing on it. The role of Princess Pamela in *Head Over Heels* was created for plus-size actor Bonnie Milligan. In the libretto, Princess Pamela's beauty is noted by many, but her size is not a part of the story. To date, this is "arguably the first Broadway musical to star a fat woman in a role where the character's size is not mentioned in the libretto, and the role could have gone to a traditional [thin] ingenue-type instead."<sup>11</sup> There is movement in the direction of true body representation onstage, and we can bring awareness of this progress to our students.

#### *Beyond the voice studio*

It may be necessary to advocate on behalf of fat students if discrimination is happening outside the voice studio. Fat singers can face discrimination in the costume shop, from directors, or from other professors/teachers. We can use our clout to stand up for our students if they are being treated unfairly.

Singing voice teachers may or may not have any agency in making casting decisions. If we do have agency, we can reinforce the idea that all bodies should be considered for all roles. If we do not have agency, we can advise all students to delete their weight on their résumés. This is a demeaning practice that has been used to discriminate against aspiring performers before

they even have a chance to audition. As a quick and easy act of micro-activism, we can all stop putting weight on our résumés.

Costuming is a sensitive and complex area, another topic worthy of its own article. Too often, when fat performers are cast in shows, there are choices made to try to hide their size through creative staging and sometimes through haphazard costuming. Restrictive undergarments may be required only for cast members in fat bodies, but not for anyone else. Fat folks deserve to look and feel just as good as everyone else in the production. As voice teachers, we can express concern to a department chair or production director regarding costuming choices that may not be working for our students. We can explain how difficult it is to breathe in shapewear, and how the integrity of vocal production can be undermined by restrictive clothing. We can ask for permission to attend costume fittings to offer support, and encourage our students to speak up about how they feel in their costumes. This can be walking a delicate line, since costuming may be beyond most voice teachers' scope of practice. However, it can also be an opportunity for interdisciplinary dialogue and brainstorming collaborative solutions. Many costume designers are already using body-shape-inclusive practices, such as those stated by Tara Maginnis in *The Costumer's Manifesto*.<sup>12</sup>

Juries or any kind of evaluated singing performance can be wonderful opportunities for our students to hear valuable feedback from other teachers. Some evaluators, however, feel emboldened to comment on students' sizes, as if that is relevant to their singing. First, make sure there is a rubric so that the criteria for adjudication are clear. Second, ensure that any references to "appearance" are clearly defined and limited in scope to what is salient to the event. Third, do not allow students to read comments from adjudicators until we have reviewed them ourselves. We all know how one "well intentioned" comment can devastate a student with its impact. If we encounter fatphobic words, actions, or ideas, report them to the highest authority. If we know the person who commented inappropriately, we can take them to coffee and talk it through. Anti-fat bias can stop if we stop accepting it. Even if all our concerns fall on deaf ears, our students will see that we advocated for them,

and such an act of allyship can still have a far reaching positive impact.

#### *Keep learning*

As singing voice teachers, we must engage in the practice of cultural humility. Cultural humility is a daily act of reflecting upon ourselves and our interactions with our students, which leads to continual revision of our best practices in order to better respond to the evolutions of our culture. The practice is ongoing and never reaches a static solution. Put simply, as practitioners of cultural humility, we are never done with the work of inclusion in our teaching spaces.

Continue to read and learn about the marginalization of fat people. Follow fat creators on social media to normalize fat people's legitimacy and personhood in our own minds through our everyday scrolling. Moving forward as teachers, we can check in with other teachers about best practices to serve fat singers and keep reviewing and revising our own pedagogic practices. We can all teach for the world we wish to build.

### **CALL FOR MORE RESEARCH**

The *Journal of Singing* represents the membership of NATS, with 7,276 members from all 50 states and 44 countries, with more than 13,000 students auditioning each year.<sup>13</sup> At best, the journal has been silent on the issue of fatness, and at worst, has provided a platform to perpetuate fatphobia and anti-fat bias. A relic of its time, the 1988 article “Fit or Fat” broadcasts bias right in the title, implying that one cannot be both fit and fat.<sup>14</sup> Unsurprisingly, the article includes blatant fat shaming, such as “Remember, the energy used in moving a lot of extra weight around is energy taken away from the singer’s art.”<sup>15</sup> The author claims not to have a thin-centric agenda, and recommends that singers search for the optimal fitness and nutrition program that is right for them, but this brief moment of reasonable advice is quickly overshadowed by a manipulative directive that “we owe it” to the world to eat healthily.<sup>16</sup>

The alarmingly recent 2022 article, “Fitness Training and the Singing Voice,” purports to be a guide for those who would choose to engage in fitness training while also pursuing a singing career, but evidence of both implicit and explicit anti-fat bias appears throughout the article.<sup>17</sup> The author claims, without evidence, that

certain types of exercise “can enhance a singer’s marketability through increased aesthetic appeal on stage and easier costuming.”<sup>18</sup> This promotes the idea that singers should conform to the beauty standards set by the industry, rather than insist that the industry be inclusive of all people. The author’s claim that people who exercise regularly are easier to costume is unsupported and seemingly outside the author’s scope of practice. The author, who lists no medical credentials, also claims that regular exercise training and disciplined nutritional monitoring have “no negative consequences,” and “there is nothing to lose (except possibly that extra weight).”<sup>19</sup> Here, the author recklessly states that people can (and strongly implies that they should) launch into exercise and diet programs without even acknowledging the potential health risks involved. The above comment also reads as a flippant attempt to make a joke about losing weight, which is inappropriate for a scholarly article in a respected journal.

This two-part article, “Anti-Fat Bias in the Singing Voice Studio,” represents the first article in the *Journal of Singing* that has taken an intentional, inclusive stance on body size. As an organization, NATS promotes progress, not prejudice. The recently launched “I.D.E.A. Toolkit” and “Best Practices Guide” are evidence of an evolving organization, responding to social changes through the intentional practice of cultural humility. We are confident that anti-fat bias, the last category of “socially acceptable bias,” is no longer acceptable here.

Far more research is needed to examine the experiences of fat students in 1:1 singing voice lessons. The authors have launched a study on this very topic and are working to bring some of the first research of its kind to the field. However, the authors also call upon all voice teachers and pedagogic researchers to create more trainings, publications, and resources for how to work with fat students in the most affirming way. Singing voice teachers need customized training to offer culturally responsive voice pedagogy to our fat students.

### **CONCLUSION**

Fatness is a social justice issue and singing voice teachers can either affirm or further marginalize fat students in the 1:1 training setting of the voice studio. In part one of this article, the authors offered background information

on the prevalence of fatness, the history of anti-fat bias, and the experiences of fat persons in healthcare, employment, and educational settings. Further information on the power of money and the media to shape anti-fat bias within our culture has been provided. Within a fat liberationist framework, the authors have rejected the long-held idea that fat bodies are problematic in the performing arts and called upon the performing arts industry to provide opportunities for talented and well-trained people of every size to work and tell stories that reflect our diverse world.

To combat the last vestiges of anti-fat bias, we offer the tangible pedagogic modifications above as ways to foster a sense of belonging for all voice students. Micro-activism in the singing voice studio can help our field take a significant step toward systemic change, while having a profoundly positive impact on our students.

Take a moment to consider how many fat singers we know and love. Envision a world without Luciano Pavarotti, Aretha Franklin, Harvey Fierstein, or Lizzo, to name only a few. Now imagine how many other fat singers were not able to persevere in such a historically hostile industry. How many artists have we missed knowing because of fatphobic gatekeeping? We must dismantle the concept that “thin is best,” and provide opportunities for people of all sizes to perform. In the best of all possible worlds, fat people would be represented onstage in the same proportions as in the world. Roles for fat people would not center around fat trauma. Roles originally played by people in thin bodies would be cast flexibly, with people in bodies of all sizes (and colors and abilities and genders) able to play those roles. This is achievable. As voice teachers, we can take the first steps toward a fat liberationist future in our singing voice studios.

## NOTES

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## **Elizabeth Ann Benson and Kate Rosen**

**Dr. Elizabeth Ann Benson** is recognized as a dynamic pedagogue, scholar, and performer. She is an Associate Professor of Music Theatre Voice at Auburn University, where she teaches applied voice for music theatre majors. She is the founder and owner of Benson Music Studios, specializing in voice training for musical theatre, popular, and contemporary singers and teachers. She has trained in numerous methodologies including Somatic Voicework™, the LoVetri Method, Soul Ingredients® Method, Rock the Audition with Sheri Sanders, and Vocal Health Education. Her book, *Training Contemporary Commercial Singers* is hailed as “a remarkable and long-awaited contribution to the world of voice pedagogy” (*Journal of Singing*). Her current research program examines issues of equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging within the voice studio. In 2021, she co-authored the seminal article “Practicing Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging in the Singing Voice Studio,” published in *Voice and Speech Review* (with Trineice Robinson-Martin and Marisa Lee Naismith). She has been a livestream guest speaker with national and international organizations including the Grammy Awards MusiCares Program, NATS Chat, Institute for Vocal Advancement, Vocology in Practice, A Voice and Beyond Podcast, VocalFri Podcast, Voice Essentials, VoiceLessons.Com, and the SpeakEasy Cooperative. A versatile singer herself, career highlights include opera (Carnegie Hall), musical theatre (Symphony Center), rock (The Hard Rock Café Atlanta), and virtual and live cabaret shows. Elizabeth holds a Master of Music degree from New England Conservatory, and a Doctorate from The City University of New York Graduate Center. She is both a graduate of the NATS Intern Program (2016) and a recipient of the NATS Emerging Leader

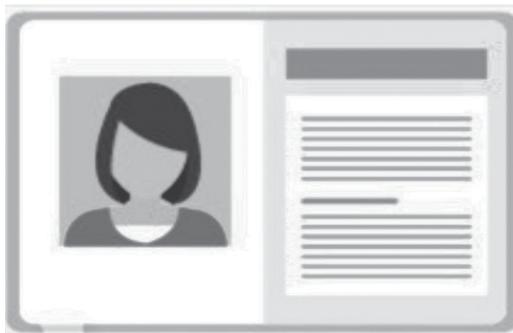
Award (2012). She currently serves as a member of the NATS National Mentoring Initiatives Committee and directs the national “Mentoring over Coffee” program. <https://elizabethannbenson.com/>

**Kate Rosen** is a singer, voice teacher, and outspoken advocate for fat folks. She runs the Kate Rosen Voice Studio, a successful independent voice studio outside of Detroit, MI. Kate started a fat liberationist offshoot of her studio in 2021 called Fat Joy Voice, which serves musical theater singers in larger bodies who have traditionally been underserved and mistreated in mainstream musical theatre training. Her pedagogy focuses on joyful singing, collaboration, and inclusion.

Kate earned her Bachelor of Music in Voice Performance from the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, and her Master of Music in Voice Performance from the University of Michigan. She is Level 2 certified in Somatic Voicework™ and has also studied Transgender Voice and Speech with Liz Jackson Hearns. Kate adjudicates for the Sutton Foster Awards, the Michigan branch of the Jimmy Awards, and has served on the Board of Directors for the Detroit Children’s Choir. She has performed at Detroit Opera, the Castleton Festival, Opera MODO, and studied Czech diction and song literature at Moravian Masterclass in the Czech Republic. Role highlights include *The Rape of Lucretia* (Lucretia), *The Medium* (Madame Flora), *Le Nozze di Figaro* (Cherubino), and *Così Fan Tutte* (Dorabella). Awards include 1st Place in the Society for Musical Arts Young Artist Competition and an Encouragement Award from the Metropolitan Opera Laffont Competition. <https://www.katerosenstudio.com/> <https://fatjoyvoice.com>

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