

Mentor Corner: Chatting with “The Masters” – NEW FEATURE!

A conversation with Elaine Panik Gates



Moderated by Amy Goldin

For a number of years now it has become increasingly apparent that NYSSMA's ranks of retired members has grown by leaps and bounds. Too often we tend to discount the enormous value of maintaining close ties with our retired colleagues. Us retired members know a thing or two about music education, and, with that in mind, I was thrilled to hear from Amy Goldin (no stranger to writing for the NYSSMA® magazine over the years) about a column dedicated to catching up with our retirees.

There is a wealth of history, outstanding advice and just plain common sense that our retired music educator members are waiting to pass along to those music educators active in New York's schools. Even during these very difficult times, it is wonderful to hear from our distinguished colleagues as they reflect on the past and the future of music education. –Tom Gellert, NYSSMA® Editor

As an undergraduate studying Music Ed at NYU, my choral director, Jon DeRevere, often raved about “a teacher on Long Island, Elaine Panik, who is doing amazing things with children’s choruses.” Years later, at a NYSSMA® festival, I heard a fellow adjudicator’s name, Elaine Panik Gates. When I introduced myself, she couldn’t have been more gracious and welcoming. Now I’m thrilled that she’s our first guest in this new SMN feature spotlighting our esteemed retired members. Please welcome my dear, close friend, Elaine Gates.

Q. So, Elaine, we’re going into month six of this crazy quarantine. What are you doing now?

I’m bored to death, I want to teach. I had just ordered a piece for my choir to use with Orff instruments, and now we can’t do anything.

Q. What choir is this?

It’s through St. Paul’s Church in Northport (NY). It was affiliated with the Lutheran Day School where I had built a general/choral program in the past few years. But once the school closed - budget issues, you know - I was out of work. The pastor wanted to keep me going; would I be interested in starting a choir? I’m not even a member of the church, and they couldn’t pay me, but it didn’t matter. I was thrilled to be able to continue with a choir. I have anywhere from 12-18 kids, including one father who sits on the floor with his one-year-old who sings along.

Q. You miss that a lot.

I sure do. There’s something interesting I’m doing now. A young lady heard that I work with children’s choruses. She emailed me, said that she’s teaching in the city, was tasked to start a choir, didn’t know anything about children’s choral literature and could I give her some tips?

I mentioned Randall Thompson’s *Velvet Shoes*, which she’d never heard of. Does anyone know *Velvet Shoes* anymore? Unison except for the last four bars - great for grades 4,5,6. She looked it up and said it’s a beautiful piece, and asked me, “Where do you find these pieces?”

I take ideas from everywhere: when I’m overseeing student teaching, when companies used to send out packets of new music, reading sessions at conferences. But working with her is just once in a while, and I really miss my regular teaching.

At LuDay, besides PreK - 6 general music and choir, I started an Orff ensemble, the “Orffans.” They didn’t just stay pentatonic. I used Orff for teaching kids to read music.

Last winter I started a women’s church group. There are around 50 women, and we sang at Christmas time. They wanted to continue so I wrote new words to old songs, such as, *There Is Nothing Like a Man*. These “Gates Girls” (I don’t like the name, I need to come up with a new one) are all 50 years old and up, up to 90, including a former dance teacher who will teach us some choreography. When we can meet again we’ll perform for church events, such as the big fall themed dinner.

Q. You’re always so busy, I’ve often told people that we need to eat our Wheaties to keep up with you! How did you get started?

I always wanted to conduct choirs. The music director in my church loved working with older singers but didn’t like working with young kids and gave me the children’s choir. I was 16.

I sang in an all-county with Luther Goodheart when I was a senior in high school. I loved working with Goody and wanted to study with him. He was the Director of Choruses at NYU. So I headed there for Music Ed. I graduated in ‘51.

Q. Elaine, I just want to repeat that date. You did say 1951?

Yes. Jobs were hard to get; music jobs were close to impossible. I couldn’t get hired as a music teacher but the superintendent in Island Trees would give me a job teaching

music part of the time if I got my masters to teach elementary grades. My first year of teaching I made \$2,800.00 a year. I taught music in the morning, 8:30 a.m. – 12 p.m., grabbed lunch, then I taught 3rd grade: reading, writing, arithmetic.

To keep this job, I got my Master's degree in Education from SUNY New Paltz. Right from the start I got involved with NMEA, SCMEA and NYSSMA®, and I started children's choruses through ACDA. There was very little music for children's choruses in those days. I found quality SATB songs that I could cut down and arrange for two parts.

I was in Island Trees until 1955, got married, had children, then heard about a job in Huntington - just music K-6. I created the "Uncle Sam Singers," over 150 kids, chosen by audition from across the school district. We sang at all-Eastern for the bicentennial!

Eventually I became Director of Choral Music until I retired in '86. I also started the choral program at the new Usdan Performing Arts Center in 1968. When I retired from Huntington, Alan Buechner called me to teach at Queens College. When they had to let me go because of budget cuts, Jerry Ross called me immediately to come to NYU, where I became Director of Undergrad Music Ed, a Super Adjunct, teaching, as well as advising and supervising student teaching, and I started the NYU Children's Chorus.

Along the way I've done clinics, workshops, guest conducting and I've been writing the Elementary Speaking column for the *School Music NEWS*, which has given me such great access to and a voice to talk about new publications and practices in elementary music teaching.

It seems like every 10 years or so something came along that changed my focus and opened me up to new things, including a true thrill, to become a semi-finalist in the first GRAMMY Music Educator Awards.

Q. Your husband, Henry Gates, was one of my family's favorite people. If he knew you were a percussionist, he'd ask you to stop what you were doing and tap a paradiddle on his arm!

I knew him casually for years, through NMEA. Henry taught at Hicksville Jr High, then eventually he became head of the Hicksville Music Department and the high school band director. I got to know him better when he started to teach at Usdan. He had the band, I had the chorus and we did pieces with both ensembles together. After each of our marriages had ended, we realized we were both exactly what we were looking for. We got married in '82, for 32 years until he passed away in 2014.

Q. Along with music, you've had an interesting background growing up on Long Island.

I've had a long and varied career. I was raised on boating; my dad insisted that I take the Power Squadron courses. I joined the Naval Reserve, at first it was to meet cute guys. I was a Yeoman but my superiors knew that I knew dead reckoning navigation, so they told me to teach it. I decided we should have a band. I went to the Lieutenant

Commander of the Power Squadron in Huntington. I knew enough of the guys who played instruments. We applied to the Navy for stands, instruments and music, and so we had a band.

Q. What are some of your philosophies and teaching tips for those of us who are both veterans and newbie teachers?

1. Not all kids learn the same way. In music, some only want to sing, others move, others to play instruments, and you have to try to keep all involved.

2. Try to make students understand that you really love your job and that you really love them. They'll know right away if that's true or an act.

3. They'll be excited about whatever you're excited about. They want to be recognized and feel like a part of your project.

4. Know your subject! Try to make your subject a part of the classroom curriculum.

5. Keep your room a happy, welcoming place. My door was always open and it was a gathering place before and after school where the kids could help decorate the room or practice Orff parts, or do something to enrich the room.

6. Use lots of praise; don't lie or make up false praise but don't stress the parts that need work. They must have done something better than last time.

Q. What does it take to be a good music teacher?

The same things that it takes to be a good TEACHER: energy, intelligence, imagination, passion. What I was trying to do at the end of my career was to show how children were learning more than only music. Parents have to be educated to realize what music teaches. Parents don't realize the depth we go into; it's not just singing songs and doing a few dances.

Q. Is there a message you'd like to share with us?

I would much rather hear a choir sing quality unison than bad harmony.

Amy Goldin started writing for the SMN in her undergrad days as student editor of the Collegiate column, and has been an occasional contributor since then. Goldin has been an NYSSMA® adjudicator in voice, all-state voice and vocal jazz for more than 30 years.

A veteran of teaching music PreK-8 in public and private schools in New York City and Long Island, she is retired from her position as an adjunct instructor in Music Education at NYU/Steinhardt. Goldin now owns COPA, Inc.: College Options in the Performing Arts, a college counseling service working with high school students in their college search and application processes. She can be contacted at info@performingartsoptions.com.