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Curating a Career in Voice at Shenandoah Conservatory

BY CYNTHIA MWENJA, PhD

Dr. Fotina Naumenko, associate professor of Voice at the Shenandoah Conservatory, is a Fulbright scholar and Grammy nominee who has earned exceptional accolades for her brilliant solo performances. Her performance credits also include elite vocal ensembles such as Skylark and Conspirare. Naumenko values a balance between her performance commitments, teaching responsibilities, and family life; she demonstrates through her own example the creative mix of roles and opportunities that she advises her students to seek.

Byron Jones, professor of Voice at the Shenandoah Conservatory, admires the compelling combination of confidence and ease that Dr. Fotina Naumenko exhibits in working with students, colleagues, and fellow performers. From the first moments the two met, Jones was struck by the insight that Naumenko “had nothing to prove, everything to share.” Now that they have worked together for eight years, his admiration for her has only grown; he appreciates her effortless integrity and professionalism as well as the collaborative partnership the two share in cultivating and mentoring students at the Conservatory.

Performing and “Correlating Careers”

As a professor of Voice, Naumenko is “passionate about staying in the performing sector”; doing so, she says, makes her more equipped as an educator. The Shenandoah Conservatory prides itself on having faculty in the industry, so it supports faculty members who sustain performance work. Naumenko points out that professors need to actively participate in the world of performance not

just to continue honing their skills but also to be abreast of the current realities and opportunities in the field.

For classical singers like Naumenko with performance interests that extend beyond opera, one specific career pipeline does not exist. As a result, building a career in the field can be highly individual and is based in each person’s interests and voice. In years past, the conventional career advice for voice students was to earn BM and MM degrees in Voice, then audition for young artist programs with various opera companies. After securing some of these opportunities, vocalists were told that the definition of success would be to secure an agent and focus on a career in opera performance.

Now, vocalists are able to—and indeed must—follow other career trajectories, such as participating in ensemble work, being concert artists, or performing as soloists with symphony orchestras. Expanding beyond opera, some vocalists may now specialize in new classical works, while others might

concentrate in early music. Realistically, Naumenko explains, the majority of vocalists today combine all of these options, as well as teaching and engaging in related fields like arts administration. Naumenko calls the array of job opportunities that vocalists assemble to earn a living “correlating careers,” noting that maybe one percent of working vocalists earn all of their income from singing.

Figuring out one’s own personal array of correlating careers is part of the discovery process for each performer. Some might broaden into other genres of music, such as R&B or jazz. An important aspect for vocalists to consider is that supplemental jobs must make sense for the individual’s interests as well as allowing for vocal health, since a singer’s voice is their instrument.

Finding a manageable balance of jobs is not always easy, Naumenko states. When she began working at the Shenandoah Conservatory in 2018, she faced a learning curve in finding the right ratio between being out of town for gigs and being on campus

to teach. She recalls that, during her early years on campus, she was gone one or two times each month to perform, whether as a soloist or with one of several professional choral organizations. Naumenko remembers that she could still teach with that level of travel—and she appreciated bringing insights from her performance opportunities to her students—but she needed a better balance between the two. Naumenko’s busy schedule was disrupted by the pandemic, and she now wonders if she would have been able to shift her own direction without it. Up until that point, she had been working as hard as she possibly could, saying “yes” to every opportunity, as many young career vocalists often feel compelled to do.

With all performance venues closed and 11 contracts cancelled in the pandemic, Naumenko took time to reflect on the kind of music she actually wanted to be doing. She decided to start more selectively saying “yes” to give herself agency over her own career direction. As a result, Naumenko conceived an ambitious project grounded in her passion

for chamber music. She engaged four different composers to write pieces for her voice and a chamber ensemble; each composition employed a different array of instruments. The pieces premiered when performance became possible again. In 2024, she produced an album, *Bespoke Songs*, which featured the collective works; it was nominated for a 2025 Grammy in the category of Best Classical Solo Vocal Album.

Projects like these involve a great deal of entrepreneurship for those involved. Naumenko funded the project by writing grants and soliciting donors. She also took care of all details in coordinating rehearsals, organizing the recordings, hiring the recording engineer, overseeing the label design, acting as producer, and promoting the album. Naumenko had no previous experience in doing any of these jobs; she developed the skills when she needed them, as many artists must do in order to create and produce their own work. Naumenko compares the experience of putting this project together to “jumping off a cliff and

trusting that something will catch you.” Her great determination and focus can be seen in the way that she managed every aspect of this project from idea to fruition.

Naumenko has also developed an additional correlating career based in her Russian and Ukrainian heritage. Her dissertation and Fulbright project focused on diction for Russian arias, and she provides those resources at her website, RussianAriaResource.com. She also works as a clinician, coaching professional groups in Russian diction. For example, she is currently working with the Houston Symphony chorus to prepare them for upcoming performances of Russian choral works. Naumenko shares this specialization with her students, as well, giving them the advantage of being able to include Russian pieces in their repertoires.

After the pandemic re-set, Naumenko is now more thoughtful about the performance opportunities she accepts. One important ongoing commitment is being a member of Skylark, “a six-time Grammy-nominated
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professional vocal ensemble known for extraordinary singing and for concerts that push beyond the conventions of traditional choral performance,” according to its website. Matthew Guard, Skylark’s artistic director, says that the professional ensemble’s members are all among the best singers in the nation, and he regards Naumenko as a model colleague with amazing talent. Not only is she a compelling soloist with a sublime voice, he affirms, but she can also meld into the ensemble and show seamless cohesion as part of the group; these skills can be challenging to balance as a vocal artist. Recently, Skylark has been performing *Re-Imaginings*, which features pieces of orchestral music re-set for voice, turning choir members into instruments. In one section, Naumenko produces a D above high C that sounds like a violin—“just her most recent display of virtuosity,” Guard states.

Guard’s and Naumenko’s mutual interests also led to a “fun collaboration,” Guard

reports. Having obtained an autographed, handwritten copy of Sergei Rachmaninoff’s 1915 a cappella choral composition, *All-Night Vigil*, Guard produced a new layout of the work. Naumenko translated the diction using her signature version of the International Phonetic alphabet, and Skylark has been performing the resulting piece since 2022.

Teaching

Of course, Naumenko shares all of her performing and correlating career experience with her students. Jones admires Naumenko as a brilliant pedagogue who is a “powerful role model, particularly for female students—and also her colleagues.” Jones and Naumenko both note that, ideally, the teacher and performer roles should each inform the other; Jones appreciates the exemplary ways that Naumenko “integrates the different parts of her professional identity.” As a stellar soloist, ensemble member, and Russian diction coach, Jones explains, Naumenko shows her students

“what a rich life in music can be.”

Naumenko points out that majoring in a discipline that does not have a clear employment path is an act of courage. Now that college is commonly understood as a pipeline to a particular job, she says, pushback can come from all sides—not only from society and one’s family, but from oneself. By contrast, Naumenko states that this view ignores what students learn in college outside of career-related information. She conceives of college as a time to explore, not just for the sole purpose of a specific career, and she hopes that students will nurture their interests and learn more about the world as they matriculate.

Naumenko is very clear with her students that they each have to make their own path in the industry. She is transparent that doing so can be quite challenging; each person has to put together their own array of answers. Naumenko tells her students that they should

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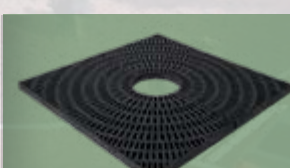
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say “yes” to many different opportunities as they are getting started—because they will need the income, but also because they will begin to figure out what they like by trying a variety of things. She also tells her students that they should later shift at some point to establish a manageable work-life balance. She encourages her students to “follow the instincts of their interests.”

Jane Gowen, owner and voice teacher at the Skylight Voice Studio, was Naumenko’s student as she earned her Master’s degree in Vocal Performance at the Shenandoah Conservatory. Gowen knew from their first lesson together that Naumenko had a knack for quickly understanding what a student needed to progress as a vocalist. Gowen has based her own way of working with students directly on Naumenko’s kind, student-centered approach. From Naumenko, Gowen learned that “life as an artist is worthwhile, even if it is not common.” Gowen recalls that Naumenko did not downplay the fact that there would be challenges and obstacles in

a performance career—but she also focused on the possibilities for creative solutions. Naumenko has helped Gowen look at the big picture; instead of only concentrating on what’s right in front of her, Naumenko advised to look at five and 10 years out, while also thinking about what she herself wanted instead of only pleasing others. From Naumenko, Gowen learned that she can take meaningful risks to follow her dreams while still making sure she takes care of her financial responsibilities and goals.

Family Life

Naumenko has needed to further develop her approach to work-life balance as her family has grown over the past few years. She carefully weighs how much out of town work to accept and confirms that continuing to enjoy professional career growth while seeing to her family’s needs is a “big balancing act.” Jones says that Naumenko is good at establishing such boundaries as an accomplished professional who is also committed to motherhood. Since her family has grown,

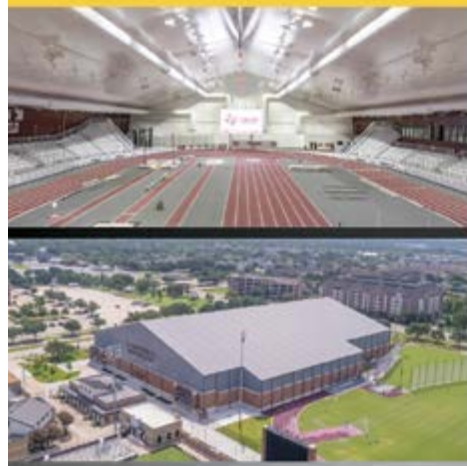
Naumenko has pivoted to taking more local contracts so that she can both perform and be home in the evenings. She has also shifted to engage in more entrepreneurship so that she has more control and decision-making power in the projects she takes on. Many academics feel pressure to minimize their families as they engage their professional obligations, and Naumenko offers a powerful corrective to this impulse in unapologetically recognizing her need to balance all of the pieces that comprise a full life.

Value of Performing Arts

Naumenko is sure that the skills that live performers develop, as well as the challenges they learn to overcome, will become even more valuable in the age of rampant AI. She points out that the humanity of live performance cannot be replicated—the somatic skill, the body awareness, and the shared live experience. As a lauded performer and educator, Naumenko cherishes the value of her craft as it enhances the human experience. In curating her own mix of performance commitments, teaching responsibilities, and family life, Naumenko illustrates exciting possibilities for individuals to flourish in the arts.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dr. Cynthia Mwenja teaches Composition and Rhetoric at the University of Montevallo.



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