

The Moving Walkway is Coming to an End

By Leah Partridge

In September 2023, I spent a month commuting to Indiana University, filling in to teach for an internationally acclaimed opera singer with a thriving career. Every week, as I passed through the Indianapolis airport, I heard the same robotic warning:

“The moving walkway is coming to an end. Please watch your step.”

No matter where I stood, the synthetic voice cut through the airport hum — a mechanical forewarning, eerily in sync with my own thoughts. Nearing 50 years of age, with around 25 years in the music industry, I found its monotony strangely personal as if someone was set to remind me each week to take note, look around, and contemplate the future.

Two weeks in, balancing 30 students a week between two universities and my independent studio in Atlanta, the analogy of the airport warning hit me. My mind spiraled with existential questions:

Why am I teaching? What future awaits these students? Why does music matter? Who really needs diction in four languages? Why hasn't anyone read a poem? How do we make audiences care? What should an art song recital look like today? Why do we keep doing it this way? How do I help them become artists, not robots? How do I steer them away from perfection? How do I show them they're not broken — they're just learning?

Somewhere in that relentless airport announcement, I found peace. How was that nagging statement peaceful? It made me remember a phrase painted on a yoga studio wall I frequented during the height of my performance career, one that always anchored me when I felt lost:

“Everything is perfect, and nothing is permanent.”

I can be just as pessimistic about the music industry as anyone: the pay is too low, the jobs too few, and the casting often misguided. It can feel like a game rigged for the privileged few in an industry that easily discards singers as disposable commodities. And music schools that sit at the top



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of this behavior are the parents churning out the same tired system, failing to evolve.

But I'm hopeful. Change is life; instead of fearing it, we can embrace it — it's the essence of creativity. Sure, uncertainty is uncomfortable. Our brains are wired to resist it because that is our animal survival mechanism that works for us, after all. But discomfort is the price of innovation. You gotta crack some eggs to make an omelet, right? So, even when my mind was bombarded with buzzing ideas that left me waking up anxious, I reminded myself — this is the creative process. When things are shifting, it's uncomfortable and about to get real. And I believe we are experiencing this as a collective, all of us who live an artistic life.

Sitting at the airport, waiting for my flight back to Atlanta, I started listing everything I wanted to change about teaching and the music industry. I traced my own path — the bumpy, joyful ride that led me here. That relentless moving walkway warning, still stuck in my head, suddenly clicked as the perfect metaphor for students.

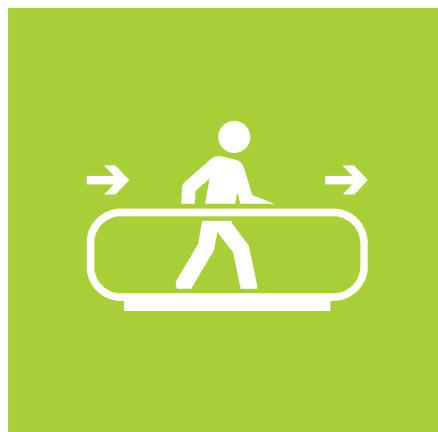
At some point, the walkway stops, and you have to walk — on your own. And sometimes, there's no polite warning.

For nearly 30 years, I've heard the same refrain: *The music industry is changing. Classical music is dying.*

And yet, here we are. Classical music continues to be a vital and thriving force in the economy.

Yes, there are fewer jobs, and companies are rethinking their audiences, but we live in a time that craves authenticity and

human connection more than ever. Maybe this narrative is just collective anxiety — our struggle to reconcile creativity with capitalism. But history proves one thing: in the darkest, most uncertain times, people have always created. And even with the threat of takeover in the arts from things like AI, we have to stay centered in knowing that live performance will always be valued and, therefore, by training students to be present, dynamic performers, we ensure that the art of live expression not only survives but thrives.



So, I see a bright future for the arts.

We're expanding our skill sets at breakneck speed, and I know we have the tools to meet this moment. Over the past decade, I've worked with young musicians who are not only talented but deeply attuned to the world around them. They're ready to do more than master their craft — they're ready to redefine it.

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But it's on us to build programs in universities and independent studios alike that prepare them for careers as unique as their talents. Yet, too often, how we train and educate students is still modeled on old methods and systems that I learned in school in the 1990s.

Revolutionizing Music Education: Preparing Artists for Success Evolving the Way We Teach

Mastery of craft will always be essential and our number one priority. Access to learning, however, has evolved, and with online courses, TikTok and Instagram tutorials from top teachers, and countless books and blogs, students are arriving at colleges more informed than ever. We should encourage them to explore these resources and embrace a more flexible, collaborative teaching approach. The old “my way or the highway” method is outdated.

Co-teaching and experimental instruction should be the norm. Traditionally, voice teachers were territorial, discouraging students from seeking outside guidance. But today, we know that working with multiple teachers can actually enhance a student's growth. I've seen students returning from studying with other teachers gain more confidence, curiosity, and reassurance in their vocal journey. Singers can handle different perspectives — it strengthens their artistry. Universities should note that students crave variety and adaptability, and rotating instructors can accelerate student's development. Letting go of control isn't easy for many teachers, but it's necessary.

Teaching More Than Just Performance On Stage

Many academic programs insist it's not their job to provide job security. I disagree. Current music business courses, if they exist at all at universities, focus on marketing performances and working with distributors — concepts that change so rapidly that their coursework becomes obsolete within a year and aren't necessarily offered to the entire music student body. Instead, we need a music curriculum that equips all students with modern, adaptable skills, especially those who don't see themselves pursuing pop stardom.

As educators, we must lead by example. Through social media, email outreach, and personal branding, we can demonstrate skills our students will need as performers and as future teachers. Yet, universities rarely offer courses that teach music students how to define their strengths, build an online presence, or develop content beyond traditional performance. This happens largely because academics haven't defined these concepts for themselves. University voice departments, like successful businesses, should establish clear mission and value statements — regularly revisiting and refining them to stay aligned with their evolving vision. Independent voice studios have an advantage because they enjoy greater creative freedom, without being constrained by rigid rubrics or college departments that structure and evaluate music programs like other academic departments.

For years, we've trained singers for careers that barely exist — only a fraction of graduates will sing opera or musical theater professionally. Meanwhile, performance opportunities in universities are shrinking, with budgets slashed and fewer productions staged. The result? Some voice majors are graduating without ever having been in an opera, musical, or even sung a solo. Instead of cutting performance opportunities and degree programs, we should expand them to include musicians who seek unique paths beyond traditional performance. The old model — training every singer to be an opera star — never worked. It left a generation of burned-out artists feeling like failures. While universities may not guarantee jobs, they shouldn't mislead students into thinking that an international classical career is the only viable option.

Imagine a school of music teaming up with the agriculture department to create original art — songs that celebrate sustainable farming, performances that bring environmental science to life, or visual storytelling that connects food production to culture. This kind of cross-disciplinary

collaboration wouldn't just showcase the university's unique strengths; it would help define its identity in an increasingly homogenized world. As virtual reality classrooms rise, universities must find new ways to stand out, and what better way than through the power of music and creativity?

Universities must do more than train musicians — they must prepare them for sustainable careers as artists, educators, advocates, or administrators. Music isn't just an art; it's an industry. We need to stop perpetuating the "starving artist" mentality and start showing students how to monetize their craft for whichever musical career path they choose.

What if music schools functioned more like top-tier business coaching programs? What if they clearly outlined their offerings, teacher strengths, and expected outcomes? In my independent studio, I took a business course that helped me define my teaching strengths and attract the right students. I use an intake form to ensure each student aligns with my expertise. If they'd be better served elsewhere, I refer them.

Most music schools lack this type of intake system. Students are often invited to audition based on a pre-screening video and accepted after a brief audition with no deep discussion of goals or fit. They arrive eager to "do music," only to be told that what they're doing isn't "correct." They may bounce between several applied teachers before graduating, leaving without a clear understanding of their individual voice or career path. We need a better way — placing voice students with teachers who align with their strengths and goals, whether in classical traditions, contemporary styles, choral singing, or pedagogy. No teacher should be expected to be all these things to every student.

One intake option could be offering workshops or summer intensives before auditions to help prospective students prepare for the rigors of a degree program and make informed choices. Yes, it's time-consuming, but if we claim to be student-centered, shouldn't we start by ensuring students are in the right place? And if a singer has a unique talent but no program at the school is available, shouldn't we guide them — even if that means to another program or school? Or shouldn't there be a faster track to adapt the program to meet the student's needs?

I've seen the cracks firsthand in ten years of teaching across four different state universities. Academia and I have had a complicated relationship. I keep dabbling in and out of it, but I knew it was time to leave my first job when I got in trouble for helping a student transfer to Belmont — because she wanted to be a singer-songwriter, not a classical pianist. She was in the wrong place, yet we were supposed to keep her there.

Teaching Business, Not Just Music

We should be equipping music students with small business skills. Programs like The Speakeasy Cooperative, founded by Michelle Markwart Deveaux (SECO) teach voice-centered entrepreneurs to identify their strengths, serve their ideal client, and build a sustainable career. Instead of comparing rates ("They charge \$60 an hour, so I guess I should too"), we should explore various business models and strategies including niche expertise that commands higher pay.

Look at industry leaders like:

- Jess Baldwin: *True Colors Creativity and Artist Coaching*: deeply committed to helping each client uncover the unique magic that each of them carries and to bring that to life in finished creative projects
- Maddie Tarbox, Shannon Coates, and Tom Burke: Building lucrative online voice teaching businesses
- John Henney: Author, teacher, entrepreneur, and popular teacher-trainer
- Ruby Rose Fox: *Muscle Music*: Teaching artists to be nervous-system aware and unshaming our innate biology to support sustainable artistry
- Dr. Dione Napier: *Amplify Voice Studio*: helping professional-level opera singers and Bel Canto voice teachers solidify contemporary voice technique and vocal styling

These artist/entrepreneur/educators, and many others, have carved out profitable, fulfilling careers outside of academia. Imagine a university-backed certificate in contemporary or classical voice pedagogy, marketing, branding, or artist entrepreneurship. With university branding and top faculty, such programs could hold even greater weight in the industry.

But the reality is many faculty are overworked, underpaid, and drowning in responsibilities. The system isn't working for teachers or students. No one can add anything else to their calendar, and the constant assessment and self-reviewing just ties up more time and leaves many creatives exhausted or phoning it in. What if universities could sharpen their focus, offering smaller, more specialized programs that play to their strengths rather than attempting to cater to everyone. This targeted approach might not only enhance student retention but could also satisfy administrators looking for stronger outcomes.

Graduate Programs: A New Possible Path

I believe that too many singers graduate with a list of their vocal "flaws" and no career path. The focus on technical perfection in 18th-century opera is valuable — but only for

the few with those skills and career goals. The rest? Left with debt, disappointment, and no direction. There have been countless students coming to my independent studio after an undergraduate degree from a university — weary, confused, and trying to figure out what value they bring to art and the industry. They can barely sing anymore because they are consumed by doubt, perfectionism, and color by number get-thee-to-a-young-artist-program strategy. Most desire to go to graduate school and some have asked me if I think it's worth it. It depends.

The reality is, students are already questioning the system. Some ask if they can build their own graduate program — studying privately, training abroad, and coaching with industry professionals. The answer? Yes, they can.

I created a sample two-year self-built post-undergraduate model for emerging classical/opera artists.

YEAR ONE

- Extensive, tailored private voice lessons
- Industry coaching with professionals secured by your teacher or connections you've made
- Immersive language study virtual or abroad
- Business coaching with professionals:
 - On camera training (speaking and performing for digital audiences)
 - Building an online presence (social media, video channels, newsletters such as Substack)
 - Monetizing skills (list-building, self-promotion)
 - Curating and creating your own performances

YEAR TWO

- Same as year one except replace language study with an international pay-to-sing program that offers you a role.

Let's compare costs. Without a significant fellowship, scholarship, or teaching assistantship, a traditional two-year university or conservatory graduate performance degree can be \$20,000-\$50,000 a year. A build-your-own graduate program could easily be half the cost, with real world experience to show for it.

To be clear, I don't recommend this for undergraduates — college provides invaluable social and academic growth. But for graduate performance majors? If schools aren't offering essential performance opportunities and business skills, why go into debt? Resources could be better spent elsewhere.

A Degree Worth Having

The future belongs to adaptable, business-savvy musicians in any genre. A truly valuable vocal program wouldn't just

train singers — it would empower them to create sustainable careers. It's time academia caught up. And if you're a student, know this: it has always been up to you. You're an artist. Getting into top programs may open doors, but true success lies in forging your own path. Don't wait for the industry to catch up — lead the way.

*With a performing career spanning over 20 years, soprano **Leah Partridge** has performed in some of the world's most significant opera houses, including Seattle Opera, The Washington National Opera, The Metropolitan Opera, Semper Oper Dresden, Palau de les Artes Valencia, Teatro Colón Buenos Aires, Deutsche Oper Berlin, Atlanta Opera, Minnesota Opera, Detroit Opera, Florida Grand Opera, and Chicago Opera Theater, among others. As a teacher, Partridge is renowned for her nurturing approach to teaching and mentoring the next generation of emerging artists. She assists singers in identifying their unique strengths and expanding their artistic capabilities by exploring a variety of styles alongside classical repertoire. Through her blog, "The Voice Box" on Substack, Partridge has gained acclaim for her insightful writing, offering in-depth narratives on the intricacies of a performing career and emphasizing the importance of understanding one's nervous system for a sustainable career in the arts. Partridge owns an independent studio in Atlanta, Georgia. She is a member of the National Association of Teachers of Singing and the SpeakEasy Cooperative. In her free time, she enjoys gardening and tending to her small flower farm outside of Athens, Georgia.*



What's your story?

"Independent Voices" articles and ideas may be submitted any time; however, the annual submission deadlines are July 15 (fall) and January 15 (spring). Articles may be 1,000 to 4,000 words, preferably first person. Please include a headshot and/or topical photo(s) and a 100-word bio. Articles accepted for (digital) publication will be available in the [public area](#) of [nats.org](#) and can be freely shared online. Email CynthiaVaughn@icloud.com.