

## What Are You Willing to Give Up?

By Cynthia Vaughn

**O**n July 2, I learned that my first professional (post-college) voice teacher died in 2024. As the "In Memoriam" names were read aloud at the NATS Conference closing business meeting, I gasped to hear the name "Ronald T. Combs." Tears rolled down my cheeks as memories filled my mind of Dr. Combs and our lessons in Chicago in the mid-1980s. I arrived in Chicago with a freshly minted master's degree in vocal performance and had already been singing successfully in the San Francisco Bay Area, singing roles with smaller opera companies and receiving the East Bay Opera Young Artist Award. I eagerly relocated to the Chicago area, where my husband



Ronald T. Combs

had started a new job while I completed my final semester of grad school. I was so excited to continue my singing career in this new city. Before I even started auditioning, I looked for a voice teacher. Dr. Ronald Combs was highly regarded, and I was thrilled that he had a spot for me in his home studio. I loved my lessons! Unlike my college lessons, which included a broad and appropriate range of musicianship skills, languages, and classical genres and repertoire, Dr. Combs specialized in the technical facility and roles that I would specifically audition for and perform as a young light lyric coloratura soubrette soprano. My technique flourished under his tutelage and my confidence soared as I began to audition for Chicago area opera companies, professional choral ensembles, operetta, and professional studio recording. I performed with Opera Works and a children's opera company that toured the Tri-State, I performed Gilbert & Sullivan leading soprano roles with the Savoy-Aires and Chicago Gilbert & Sullivan Series (which



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performed the entire 14-show G&S canon in a single season in a black box theater with piano), I sang soprano solos with a few suburban orchestras and choirs, placed in a competition I don't remember, and was a studio vocalist for choral demos with Hope Publishing. In other words, I was doing well!

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After I'd studied with Dr. Combs for about a year I asked him, during a lesson, for an honest evaluation. "Do you think I have what it takes for an international singing career?" He paused a long time, before replying, "No. I don't think you naturally have enough killer instinct." I was stunned but he didn't give me time to respond. He went on, "Talent wise, you are in the top five percent of students I've worked with. You have a beautiful voice, you are pretty, you are very musical, and you work very hard. However, I see how happy you are in your life, with your husband, with your new house in the suburbs. Success comes at a cost. What are you willing to give up? Do you want this career more than anything? More than relationships, more than family? More than air? My most successful students live out of suitcases. They are always traveling and it's a lonely life. Is that what you want?" I didn't answer and he left me to think about it as his next student arrived. As I drove home from the city to the suburbs, I thought about his words and at my next lesson I had an answer. "No. I'm not ready to give up the life I have now." As I recall, he looked relieved and said, "I believe you will have a satisfying career and will continue to perform locally and regionally. And you'll have a lot of students because you're good and people like you." And then we sang warmups. I wish I could tell Dr. Combs, forty years later, that he was right. Rest in peace.