

The Inaugural True Voice Award



photo: Greg Parkinson

Professor Katherine Goforth, who teaches voice lessons at Clark College, has been named the inaugural recipient of The Washington National Opera's True Voice Award for transgender and nonbinary singers. Goforth will perform at the Kennedy Center's Millennium Stage in Washington, D.C. in May 2024.

A talented, celebrated opera singer, Goforth has performed in

several countries and in several languages. For years, Goforth had been singing tenor in male roles, but it was a struggle to identify with the male characters.

While an undergraduate at St. Olaf College, a private Lutheran college in Minnesota, Goforth reached self-realization that she was queer and that this included her gender identity.

However, Goforth was unsure how to move forward in an authentic way. From where she stood at the time, transgender and other gender-diverse people did not get to participate in the world of classical music or opera. She had so many questions: How could she continue pursuing her dream of singing classical music and opera? Would she ever be offered roles again if she presented as a woman?

Eventually, Goforth told a small number of people she trusted. But she continued presenting male, using her birth name, and singing male roles, even though it did not feel authentic.

A decade passed before Goforth started to live her life authentically. She came out publicly as a woman January 2020, shortly before the pandemic lockdown.

Her Beginning

Goforth grew up in Vancouver in a home where “music wasn’t art—it was a part of everyday life. Part of my family’s life,” she said.

Encouraged by her parents, especially her musician father, Goforth began singing before she could remember and she first performed at 3 years old. She loved singing and she enjoyed performing, whether hymns at church or in a variety of choirs.

She explained: “I got serious about singing because I liked the positive attention I received from adults, especially from people outside of my family. Participating in music was how I navigated social situations, how I made friends, how I felt

like I was worth something.”

At 14, when Goforth was a student at Vancouver School of Arts and Academics (VSAA), she started taking private voice lessons at her choir teacher’s recommendation.

“VSAA gave me the space to develop my own creative voice,” Goforth said. “We did tons of concerts and performances, but the projects that we designed ourselves are what most sticks with me, and the teachers who taught me to think critically and creatively.”

She said, “As I work to make spaces where we can deconstruct white supremacy and patriarchal domination, where all artists can show up authentically, I’ve found myself using those creative skills – creating opportunities where I can thrive, where others can thrive.”

At VSAA, she participated in vocal music, theater, and she played the clarinet. She also co-created a mural and wrote an opera for her senior capstone project. She graduated from VSAA and went to college to focus on singing. She received her bachelor’s degree from St. Olaf College, Minn., and her master’s degree from The Julliard School, N.Y.

Since then, Goforth has performed around the U.S. and in Germany, France, and the United Kingdom. She has performed in French, German, Italian, Mandarin, Russian, and Polish.

Goforth has excelled at thriving—despite the barriers.

Her Accomplishments

In the Pacific Northwest, Goforth has performed with Portland Opera, Bozeman Symphony, Walla Walla Symphony, Vancouver Symphony Orchestra, Opera Bend, Harmonia Seattle, Opera Theater Oregon, Sound Salon, Artists Repertory Theatre, Fuse Theatre Ensemble, Pink Martini and more.

She was a member of the International Opera Studio of Opera Köln. She attended the Franz Schubert Institut in Austria, Britten-Pears Young Artist Programme in England, Heidelberger Frühling Liedakademie in Germany, Georg Solti Accademia in Italy, and the Boston Wagner Institute in the U.S.

Goforth received the Career Advancement Award and was a featured speaker and performer at the Dallas Symphony Orchestra's fourth Women in Classical Music Symposium, 2022.

Outside of opera, she played the role of Rebbetzin Tzurris in a reading of Dan Kitrosser's "Why This Night?" for Artists Repertory Theatre Mercury Festival and played Emily Webb in Thornton Wilder's "Our Town" for Fuse Theatre Ensemble, both in Portland.

Most recently, she appeared in Philip Venables and Ted Huffman's *The F****ts and Their Friends Between Revolutions* that premiered Summer 2023 at Manchester International Festival, Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, and Bregenzer Festspiele, some of the biggest arts and opera festivals in the world.

Goforth advocates for the self-determination of trans and nontrans people. A member of the Trans Opera Alliance, she has lectured for Renegade Opera, published an essay in *Opera Canada Magazine*, was quoted in *Opera America Magazine*, and been a guest speaker for Boston Conservatory and the League of American Orchestras, among others.

In the years since Goforth the undergraduate student realized her authentic self, she says there are more transgender opera singers now.

"More people had the courage to come out during/after the pandemic lockdown, but they aren't necessarily working in the industry yet," Goforth said. "Now I'm working on coalition building. We aren't organized enough to change the industry yet."



photo courtesy of Katherine Goforth

We met up with Professor Goforth during Fall term finals week. She made time in her schedule to sit down with us in Penguin Union Building to talk about her journey, her passion for singing opera, and her values she shares with her students.

Q & A with Katherine Goforth

Q: What was it about opera drew you in and made you say, “Yes, I will sing opera!”

KG: Because I was good at it. I wish that my answer was more about how much I loved it. I was definitely obsessed, especially at first, but I got a lot of privileges when I started winning singing competitions. I didn’t learn to love classical music until much later, when I was in my early twenties.

Q: In your biggest and bravest dreams, did you ever imagine

you'd be singing at the Kennedy Center?

KG: Always. Not necessarily the Kennedy Center, but I always imagined that I'd be on the biggest stages. That was what made singing feel valuable to me. That's also what made it hard to come out. What if I lost access to these big stages, the reason I'd been pursuing music in the first place? Who am I without the privileges that music has given me? Those were really important questions for me to ask myself and working (continuing to work) on my answers to them has finally helped me grow.

Q: What was your reaction to receiving this award—and being the first recipient?

KG: It's very difficult to be the first person to do something. There are opportunities, but there are also limitations. It's felt important to push for the True Voice Award to be as expansive as possible, so that the next winner doesn't have to be anything like me, so that they can push on the award to make space for them. It's felt like a huge opportunity, because representation can be validating, but it can also be a way of limiting, of saying, this is the one acceptable way to be this kind of marginalized person. Especially as a white trans person, it's important to me to push back on that. To say, I'm not the definition of what it means to be trans, I'm one of many." Q: How long will you be at Kennedy Center? What are your criteria/thought process for choosing the pieces you will perform at The Kennedy Center?

I'll be in residence at the Kennedy Center for a week, and I want my performance to lay a foundation that is going to be broadening instead of narrowing. We have a narrative in the opera field that when trans women participate, they sing male parts and present as male onstage. I want people to know that there's no such thing as one kind of trans woman, and we're not all okay with playing male roles, so I want to present a variety of other images. Definitely female roles, but maybe a

male role in female presentation. Some songs that don't require the singer to have any particular gender identity."

When I was at Juilliard, Melissa Harris-Perry came to give a talk for Martin Luther King Day. She talked about the "I Have a Dream" speech and told us that one reason King spoke at the Lincoln Memorial was because of Marian Anderson's performance at the same place in 1939. Anderson sang at the Lincoln Memorial because the Daughters of the American Revolution would only allow white artists to perform at D.C.'s Constitution Hall, where Howard University wanted to host her concert. I will never forget the way Professor Harris-Perry described Marian Anderson as "preparing the Lincoln Memorial as a site of resistance." I may only be able to resist in tiny ways, but my dream for my performance at the Kennedy Center is that it might prepare the True Voice Award as a place of resistance against all that is imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal in our lives.

Q: In the last year, you decided you will no longer perform male roles. You said you came to this conclusion after having the opportunity to play female roles, including Emily Webb in "Our Town." How did you come to this decision? How did playing female roles resonate with you?

KG: When I came out, I expected to keep playing male roles. That was the space that existed for trans women in opera. But when I had my first chance to play a male role with a major company after coming out, it was a painful experience. And then I had my first chance to play a female role, and it was so easy. I could relate to the character, I could react intuitively to my scene partners and my emotions, and for once, no one told me that I looked or sounded wrong. And in 2022, it became increasingly clear to me that I couldn't continue to have parts of myself stuck in the pre-coming out and parts in the post-coming out. I would need to step forward with every part of myself, and I would have to leave behind the things that were holding me back, or I was never going to

be able to move forward.

Q: What is your essential message—as an opera singer and as a voice teacher?

KG: First, the question: When we have a stage, what do we do with it? And when I say that, it comes with the understanding that every action, every conversation is a platform as much as any concert program. That we can act consciously or unconsciously just like we can choose the song we want to sing both consciously and unconsciously. That our choices in music and in life can be made in or out of alignment with our values.

And also, that we always have the power to think for ourselves. It's like when bell hooks discusses the book, *Powers of the Weak in Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*: we have the power to disbelieve what others tell us about ourselves, and to believe our own stories. We have the power to think critically, and to develop our critical thinking skills. We have the power to listen to our bodies and to act on that information.

Q: What are the values behind your career and your teaching?

KG: I'm always reading Black feminist and liberation theory and try to choose actions that are in alignment with what I've learned. For me, there's no point in living if your life isn't yours, and I found that my life wasn't mine when I didn't come out, when I don't tell my truth. I think about when Audre Lorde's daughter said, "Tell them about you're never really a whole person if you remain silent," and Lorde wrote, "the machine will try to grind you into dust anyway, whether or not we speak. We can sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and ourselves are wasted, while our children are distorted and destroyed, while our earth is poisoned; we can sit in our safe corners mute as bottles, and we will still be no less afraid." I think about this quote because that has

been my experience. That reminds me of what it felt like to be closeted.

So, I'm always hoping that I can connect my teaching to my real life, and to my students' real lives. Maybe they don't realize it now, but they'll realize it in ten years. I've had that experience, where I only realized what I learned in retrospect. And maybe they'll never realize that I had a positive impact on their

thinking, and that's good too, because what's important is that the impact happens, and they think for themselves, and live a life that they feel is worth living. And even if I have a negative impact on an individual, maybe they learn what they don't want, and how to be in a better situation in the future, or they learn to walk away from a situation that doesn't work for them. Because my negative experiences can be important to my learning as well, and I have struggled to walk away from detrimental situations, and helping a student learn to do that might be the most important thing they learn at all.

Q: How do you instill the love of singing in your students? Is this different from how you were taught?

KG: This is a very complex question. To begin, I don't think I was taught to love in any facet of my life. I hope that wouldn't be hard for anyone who has been part of my life to hear, and I'm sorry if it is, but I don't think love was part of the majority of my life.

To talk about love, we have to start by defining what we're talking about. I find that, over and over, when I talk about love with another person, it means something different to each of us. bell hooks had two main definitions of love: that it is "a combination of six things: care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect and trust," and, quoting M. Scott Peck, that it is "the will to nurture our own and another's spiritual growth." When we look at love like this, it might

not apply as directly to singing.

In addition, we have to talk about what we mean by the word “singing.” If you had asked me at 18 whether I loved singing, I would have said yes. But what I would have meant was that I was addicted to how good it felt to be onstage, to be applauded, to feel superior to others, to feel a sense of self-worth through my accomplishments.

So, I would say that I hope I’m teaching my students not to get addicted to adulation, and instead to develop a personal relationship with singing. To me, singing isn’t something that we do on a stage. It’s something that’s done in private, alone, day in and day out, when it’s easy, when it’s not. It’s connected to forming a relationship with one’s own body: how do I feel today, how does my voice feel, can I understand why I’m feeling those things, what do I like, what do I not like, what do I want to change, what changes can be immediate and what changes will take time? It’s not only how I feel in this moment, but it’s connecting what I experienced today to what I experienced a week ago, next week, etc.

Q: What’s next for you (not including Kennedy Center)?

KG: I’m going to Boston in March to give a recital for the Boston Wagner Society, returning to Opera Bend to do a production of La traviata where we’ll adapt a tenor role into some kind of female and/or trans presentation, Beethoven’s 9th Symphony with Vancouver Symphony in June, and work on creative projects. And hopefully some other projects that I can’t announce quite yet!

Learn more about Katherine Goforth

- Katherine Goforth’s website
- The Kennedy Center’s news release announcing Katherine Goforth’s award

- Washington Blade: “Washington National Opera honors Katherine Goforth”
- Read Katherine Goforth’s 2020 essay, “Lived Experience: Transgender Opera Singers Still Fear Coming Out and Losing Work” published in *Opera Canada Magazine*
- Bryce McClendon’s *Beyond Travesti* podcast: Katherine Goforth presents “The Revolution We Need”