

Interview Article

An interview with Dr. Marie Bird: vocal performance and cabaret

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Abstract

Often a talented performer or vocalist will establish themselves as an authority in a certain realm or genre of music. In this interview, the realm of “cabaret” is defined, reviewed and discussed as a musical art form. The interview discusses themes and components of this realm and suggests its relevance as an art form

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Introduction

Recently Dr. Marie Bird led a magnificent number of colleagues in a tribute to the idea of “cabaret” and performed several pieces of music honoring several composers and showcasing several of her colleagues in this endeavor. In this interview, Dr. Bird is interviewed about the idea of “cabaret” and responds to questions about this musical form.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: First of all, can you please tell us a bit about yourself and the various musical events that you have been involved in?

Marie Bird: I am currently working as an Assistant Professor of Music in Voice at Eastern New Mexico University, in Portales, New Mexico. Over the past 12 years, I have performed in operas, musicals, recitals, cantatas, and cabaret programs across the United States. I am known for my energized performance, teaching, and mindfulness coaching. I have performed with such companies as the Lubbock Symphony Orchestra, Jacksonville Symphony Orchestra, Taos Opera Institute, the Amarillo Opera, Red River Lyric Opera, Seagle Music Festival, and the Orvieto Musica Festival in Italy. Some of my most noteworthy roles have been Prince Orlofsky in Johann Strauss Die Fledermaus and the Witch in Sondheim's Into the Woods. I am an advocate for both classical and nonclassical vocal styles. My students and I maintain active performance schedules in which we perform cabaret, opera, art song, musical theater, jazz, country, pop, and R&B repertoire. I hold degrees in vocal performance from Texas Tech University, the University of Alabama, and Florida State University. Before coming to ENMU, I taught at Midland College in Midland, Texas where I taught applied voice lessons and helped manage a continuing education program for students of all ages in West Texas. Over the past 12 years, I have performed in operas, musicals, recitals, cantatas, and cabaret programs across the United States

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My most recent performance was a cabaret recital entitled *Welcome to the Cabaret!* performed on September 30, 2024 in Portales, New Mexico. I hold a Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Vocal Performance from Texas Tech University, a Master of Music degree in Vocal Performance from the University of Alabama, and a Bachelor of Music degree in Vocal Performance from Florida State University.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: Now your definition of "cabaret"?

Marie Bird: Cabaret is a lyric-driven fusion of performative genres. Cabaret combines elements of classical art song, theatre, musical theatre, and contemporary song to create a kinetic entertainment experience for audience members. Along with the importance of text and fusion of genres, cabaret allows the artist(s) to practice creative freedom through a DIY or Do-It-Yourself production style. If you can think it and produce it, you can perform it through cabaret. This creative outlet promotes a sense of freedom and a need for expressive detail. For these reasons, I find cabaret to be both an enjoyable and an exacting artistic exercise for myself and my students.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: What role does stage presence and charisma have in connecting with your audience?

Marie Bird: Stage presence plays an important role in live performance. The more presence, charisma, and purposeful movement you utilize on stage, the more you will connect with your audience.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: In your performances, you rely on body language, facial expressions, and hand gestures. What role does all this play in communicating to the audience in songs like "Amor" (love), "Can't Sleep", and "Tendrement"?

Marie Bird: Using a wide variety of expression in cabaret is key! Due to the lyric-driven nature of the genre, every cabaret piece demands both musical and physical expression to help fully communicate what each character is wanting and feeling in the moment. Ultimately, this sense of varied expression helps the audience better relate to the music.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: You were accompanied on piano by Dr. Lanjiabao Ge during the recital. What is the role of the piano in presenting music by Kurt Weill and Erik Satie, just to name a few composers?

Marie Bird: The pianist is quintessential in most song recital settings, and the same is true for cabaret recitals. The pianist serves as the singer's "other half" respectively, expounding upon the emotion of each song through their musical textures. By collaborating with Dr. Ge, I was able to more fully embody and portray each song's character and emotions.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: Often you share the stage with other vocal performers, in one instance, Stephanie Beinlich, soprano. What are the challenges of working with another talented vocalist?

Marie Bird: I strive to collaborate with other musicians whenever possible. The main challenge I experience when working with other musicians is scheduling. Musicians lead continually busy lives, and it can be difficult to find a rehearsal time that works in everyone's schedule. However, the more I collaborate with others, the more meaningful and enjoyable the music becomes.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: What role do stage props play in cabaret performances?

Marie Bird: Stage props can add emotion and interest to a cabaret performance. If the prop(s) help promote the meaning of the text, then I encourage singers to use props in a performance. For example, I use a large hat onstage when I perform Erik Satie's "La Diva de L'Empire" because a "grand chapeau Greenaway" or a "big Greenaway hat" is mentioned several times in the text.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: When one hears the word "cabaret," one almost immediately thinks of the Broadway musical with Joel Grey and Liza Minnelli. Have they or their performance and the music from that musical impacted your performance?

Marie Bird: Absolutely. Grey and Minnelli are the epitome of cabaret style; both singer-actors are highly creative, charismatic, and attentive to text. Their performance in *Cabaret* is hypnotic.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: Presenting songs in other languages such as "Berlin im Licht" by Kurt Weill is impressive yet probably challenging. Your thoughts?

Marie Bird: Singing in a foreign language is a challenge, but it has gotten easier for me over time. The best way to practice singing in a foreign language is to get to know the general characteristics and flow of each language, like the roundedness of French or the aspirate nature of German. After you become more familiar with a language, I recommend translating each individual word of the lyrics or poetry to develop an emotional connection to the text. Then, I recommend repeating the text slowly until you develop a strong lingual muscle memory. This process is tedious yet rewarding, and I enjoy guiding my students through this process in the voice studio.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: What have I neglected to ask about the cabaret as a venue to practice your creative freedom via expressive detail and body language?

Marie Bird: Ultimately, I view cabaret as a versatile artistic playground. I encourage readers to listen to and learn more about cabaret music by reading David Sabella and Sue Matsuki's book entitled *So You Want to Sing Cabaret: A Guide for Performers*. There are endless artistic possibilities to discover within the genre. If you can think it, you can "cabaret" it!

Biodata of Author and Interviewees



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Mezzo-soprano Dr. **Marie Bird** is known for her energized performing, teaching, and mindfulness coaching. Dr. Bird has performed with such companies as the Lubbock Symphony Orchestra, Jacksonville Symphony Orchestra, Taos Opera Institute, Amarillo Opera, Red River Lyric Opera, Seagle Music Festival, and the Orvieto Musica festival in Italy. Some of her most noteworthy roles have been Prince Orlofsky in Johann Strauss *Die Fledermaus* and the Witch in Sondheim's *Into The Woods*.

Dr. Bird is an advocate for both classical and nonclassical vocal styles. She and her students maintain active performance schedules in which they perform opera, art song, musical theater, cabaret, jazz, country, pop, and R&B repertoire. Dr. Bird is also a mindfulness specialist and mental health advocate. She has completed MBSR or Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction training through the University of Massachusetts Medical School Center for Mindfulness and the research of Dr. Jon Kabat Zinn. Mindfulness is the act of staying in the present moment, non judgmentally. Dr. Bird uses mindfulness exercises that include, but are not limited to breath work, body mapping, meditation, and yoga to help her students with performance anxiety and self-doubt. Dr. Bird continues to do research in mindfulness and help performers with their anxiety both on and off the stage. Dr. Bird holds degrees in vocal performance from Texas Tech University, the University of Alabama, and Florida State University. She has previously taught at Midland College in Midland, Texas where she taught applied voice and helped manage a continuing education program, which provided voice lessons to people of all ages in the Midland and Odessa regions (Web 1). E-mail: Marie.Bird@enmu.edu

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