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Member Highlight - Maggi Smith-Dalton

**Boston Singers' Resource News Bulletin, August
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One of the things BSR feels is so important for us to recognize is that good classical singing comes in many different forms. "Classical" singing does not always mean standing on stage in a tux or a gown and delivering. It is with this thought in mind that we introduce to you the delightful Mrs. Maggi Dalton. Maggi has a beautifully trained soprano voice which she and her equally talented husband, Jim, devote to a unique set of programs. Their repertoire includes 100s of pieces from the American and British Isles popular/vernacular, folk, and cultivated traditions. They are part performing artists and part teachers so their musical performances are loaded with great story telling and audience participation. I recently had the chance to hear Maggi and Jim in concert and was totally enthralled with their personal warmth, commitment to their art, performance experience, and musical intelligence. A 20 year performance veteran and American Studies scholar, Maggi gives us a fresh outlook on the art of singing and song research.

MAGGI SMITH DALTON: It is impossible to write about Maggi Dalton without including her lifelong partner and husband, Jim Dalton. They have been performing together since 1981 where they met in New Jersey. Since then, they have lived and worked all over the country and only just recently settled in New England. They also co-own a publishing and production company called Singing String Music; and publish a free quarterly online newsletter (Singing String News Online). They gain constant inspiration from one another. "Generally, when we research, Jim looks through the music and I look for the cultural context," says Maggi. "This is one of the things we've decided to specialize in because history and music are long time interests of both of us." says Jim. It is obvious in their performances that their love for each other as well as for their art is a driving force behind all of their music making.

Jim and Maggi have devoted their musical talents to the research and performance of music from the American, Celtic, and British Isles traditions. Their home library includes thousands of books for music research and stringed instruments. They draw their repertoire from all styles of music - popular/vernacular, folk, and cultivated traditions and cover time periods from the Middle Ages to the present.

An American Studies graduate of Skidmore College, Maggi also studied voice at Georgian Court College and Westminster Choir College as well as special education and music therapy.. She sings and plays 12-string



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guitar for the duo. "She employed her soaring, floating lyric soprano to good advantage while he played a number of guitars, banjos, mandolins, and even...the pennywhistle," (Ocean City Sentinel-Ledger) Jim, an accomplished instrumentalist and graduate of both Rutgers University and The Lionel Hampton School of Music (University of Idaho), plays a variety of instruments including (but not limited to) Guitar, Lute, Mandolin, Banjo, and Bouzouki. He also sings, composes and arranges much of his and Maggi's repertoire. Jim and Maggi's programs include historical commentary and audience participation. They also reflect the continual, on-going research in which the two delight so the programs change frequently.

"We ARE Amused: Songs and Stories of Victorian America" will be featured on Thursday, September 5, 2002, at 7 PM, at the Andover Historical Society, 97 Main Street, Andover, Massachusetts (978-475-2236 for information). "The songs, historical narrative, stories, and anecdotes will illuminate what was important to the American heart in Victorian and Edwardian times," says Maggi. Other programs they have developed include Seasonal Concerts (Spring Equinox, Summer Solstice, Autumnal Equinox, and Winter Solstice), Life songs (musical celebrations of the lifecycle), Lux Mundi (Songs of Fire and Light), The Impulse to Soar (Music by, for, and about women), The Civil War from cause to cost, Shakespere Song Festival, Spook Songs (the supernatural ballads), and "My time is today," a program about the music and life of George Gershwin. For a full list of programs, please contact maggi@singingstring.org

In addition to their performing, Maggi and Jim have been artists in residence at various community and educational centers throughout the US. They have created several courses, seminars and workshops including "Understanding History Through Music," "American Voices," "A Musical/Historical Exploration of Group Singing," "Music and the Learning process," and "Victorian and Victrola." "The educational work we do in schools is important. For many students it is revealing because there is no light show or booming amplifiers. Some are amazed that we can make music with just a guitar and voice," says Maggi.

Maggi has also designed and directed a music program for multiply handicapped children with special focus on children with autism. Upcoming New England workshops include "Selected Topics in Art, Music, Literature, and History" at the Rogers Center for the Arts, Merrimack College, 10 weekly sessions on Wednesday afternoons starting September 18, at 3 PM. For more information on these programs and others, please contact maggi@singingstring.org

Jim and Maggi have released two recordings entitled "Wayfarin' Stranger: Songs of Yearning" and "Wild Rushing Waves: Songs of River and Sea.". They have toured nationwide and been featured on NPR public radio, television, and in the print media including a 1997 feature story in the Philadelphia inquirer.

BSR: You have such a beautiful soprano voice (as many of your reviewers agree). I am so glad to hear it in your performances because so much of the folk-based music I hear today is sung in an alto/belt type voice. Is one register more historically "authentic?"

MAGGI: Thank you so much for your lovely compliment! Of course, folk music being what it is, any voice register would be just as authentic as the next. Historically, however, the demarcations between genres or types of music (i.e., folk "vs." so-called "serious" music) were not at all as tightly- or finely-drawn as modern audiences (and many

performers!!) have been conditioned to think they were/are. That constructed separation is a relatively recent development, historically speaking. So, my generic answer to your question as phrased is "not really." However, it's true that each genre of music requires informed sensibility and an unshakable commitment to maintaining integrity of style. Understanding performance practice for an historical piece is vitally important (and I maintain that "historical" fits all the music any of us perform).

It is the marriage of words and music which give singing its soul-power. Beauty of musical line is important, certainly, most assuredly; but, for a singer, words "r" us. As a singer, I am storytelling -- honoring human memory, recording and reshaping human experience. This is a bardic function I take very seriously. My personal guiding aesthetic is to produce a clear and well-supported sound (regardless of the genre). If a totally pure, clear, 'bel canto' sound is not appropriate, as in some styles it is not -- I always remain responsible not only to the composed or improvised melody, but most essentially, to the narrative. I employ variable timbres, choose certain colors, take specific approaches to vocal production, and utilize different areas of my range as seems appropriate to the individual piece. Thus, I bring an intensely passionate commitment to clear articulation, to intelligent phrasing, and above all to maintaining the integrity of the narrative when I sing and interpret any genre of music. This is of truly paramount importance to me -- this is where I "live," so to speak.

BSR: Well, your passion and marriage to the narrative shows in your performance and, most impressively, without sacrificing any of your lovely tone and committed performance. And I think it is wonderful that you place most of your repertoire in your soprano range. I, personally, really enjoy the physiological high of singing in my soprano range (it is somewhat of a gentle aerobic workout for me.) So, even though I have a solid lower range, I find that I get bored singing there even if the text is great. Do you know what I mean?

MAGGI: Absolutely! A snore for the singer--boring for the audience too! And it's gratifying that you give me the chance to comment on this by your astute observation based on YOUR own experience as a singer. (What a treat! SO hard to talk about this with "civilians"!!!) When I talk about "self-referential singing" part of what I mean is this: singing everything as if it were "interchangeable" rep, that the only thing that's important is just keeping that same "sound" throughout. I call this approach "Light-Bulb Singing." This kind of singer "stands still" vocally, sounds "the same" no matter what they are singing. It's what I find difficult to listen to in "folk" music concerts--monotonous musical line verse after verse after verse; it's also what I find a snore in "classical" music concerts too--monotonous musical line verse after verse after verse.

BSR: Tell us a little about the repertoire for your next concert.

MAGGI: The next local concert we are performing, on Thursday, September 5, 2002, at 7 PM, is entitled, "We ARE Amused": Songs and Stories of Victorian America." It will be given at the Andover Historical Society, 97 Main Street, Andover, Massachusetts. (978-475-2236 for information). In this program we perform music beloved by the society of

19th-century America. Songs and historical narrative, stories, and anecdotes will illuminate what was important to the American heart in Victorian and Edwardian times.

The music ranges from minstrel show and "folk" songs to sentimental parlor songs, social reform music, and sophisticated concert repertoire. Victorians were no slouches in the music department! We use a wide variety of instruments appropriate to the repertoire, including period and replica banjos, mandolin, concertina, guitar, and piano, played in historically-informed style. A particular favorite is "Wilt Thou Be Gone, Love?" -- a Stephen Foster duet based on a scene from Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet." Italian opera was a strong component of the popular culture, and this Foster song shows the influence of that repertoire.

This is one of our three most-requested programs; in its initial incarnation as "Victorian Parlor Songs," it was our first "historical" concert. We premiered this (many years ago!) at Nook Farm in Hartford, Connecticut, home to Harriet Beecher Stowe and Mark Twain, where we had also done much of our initial research.

BSR: Do you ever do "Art Songs" anymore? ie: Songs written specifically for the recital hall or stage with emphasis on the composition and poetry as opposed to the cultural/historical context?

MAGGI: Yes, we most certainly do perform "art songs" in some of our concerts. It is our mission to break down these walls between cultivated and vernacular music. In our programs, cultivated music is represented most often by English Renaissance composers (especially of lute songs) and American composers of all periods. In my work as a solo artist, I also sing the so-called "standard repertoire" in churches, at special events, with choruses and choirs, and in festivals, etc. (Please note: We favor "cultivated music" as a term which is more accurate to employ than "classical," just as "vernacular" is more appropriate than "popular" or "folk").

We are totally dedicated to bringing to audiences the immense wealth and variety of music which is the human legacy, and categories be damned! We constantly run into stereotypes and misconceptions of course, and have a lot of "war-stories" to tell: "I don't think some of that music belonged in the same program" came from a rather stiff, middle-aged gentleman after one of our concerts in Connecticut. We steeled ourselves for the "you should only do classical music" critique... then, with a slight smile, "I don't believe Dowland and Mozart belong in the same program."

BSR: Can you give some personal examples of historical/cultural research on cultivated songs that may shed some light on the way they could be performed?

MAGGI: Let me give just one example from an incredible array I could choose from. We worked with a musician and teacher who needed to teach his kids to perform standard piano rep, Western canon and all that, at an urban magnet school. He was running into difficulty with his kids, since this rep was not from "THEIR" ethnic backgrounds so they got kinda resistant -- had no interest in learning it or even showing up to recitals to play it! So we suggested the students put together an entire

project around the piece they were playing (in this case a piece by Beethoven). Goal: to integrate the essential humanity of the piece into playing the actual musical composition. First & most important thing to get across: the music GREW FROM A REAL HISTORICAL life. So: they were to include the composer in the story: what was he like; what was he doing when he wrote the piece; who was he in love with (is there passion in the piece?); who did he hate (is there anger in the piece?); who was he trying to impress (is there adulation in the piece?); what was the house and city and nation he lived in like at the time; what kind of atmosphere did he write in, etc. Did the kind of clothes he wore, food he ate, things he gazed at from his window affect how he himself played the piece he was writing, or otherwise influence the way he wrote? Who premiered the piece? why? how? where?

Then, research its place in his oeuvre; what do musical scholars say about the piece; what came after it, what came before it. does it relate to what other composers did? What about writers, poets, businesspeople, politicians of the time -- what kind of world surrounded the composer?

The students learned the piece with all this information about the performance, and they also wrote up a little program for their piece, to be handed out at the recital. This gives them a personal INVESTMENT in performing the music...etc. You can bring all kinds of study into this approach: historical, musicological, theoretical and so on. But, remember, the goal is: to play the music. We are not musicologists or historians first, we are performers. Scholarship is at the service of the music, which takes precedence. Now, when you sit down at the piano, you are playing from a deeper UNDERSTANDING. You "own" the piece in an entirely different way. It WILL make a difference!

BSR: Ok, so for the question that plagues every singer - what do you do when a troubled singing technique (for whatever reason - sick, dry, tired, falty...) is "interrupting" your song interpretation?

MAGGI: That's when you RELY on your technique, frankly. When I have no worries of this kind, my music just literally floats out of me; such a delicious experience. But human bodies are vulnerable instruments. It's discipline that saves you and also, let's speak to the theatrical part of performing...one must be a very good actress! This is where intelligence and scholarship comes in; in your interpretations and approaches. My idea of heaven is singing by Jim's side on the perfect stage, an orchestra and a really hot band on hand for some numbers: with gentle and skillful lighting, marvelous acoustics, a full and friendly house, all viruses, cold & flu bugs long extinct... and a lovely inexhaustible waterfall of pure springfresh drinking-water bubbling by my side!

BSR: Amen.

BSR: If one wanted to put together an American or British Isles performance such as yours for a recital, what books or websites would you suggest to have? Also, do you offer individual consultations for singers in addition to your workshops?

MAGGI: I really don't offer consultations per se. The very best advice either Jim or I can offer when asked these questions is: find something you yourself are really passionate about and believe in, and use that as

the engine which drives the research and rehearsal and performance. As to books and websites to consult, that really depends on what you have in mind, of course. The Library of Congress "American Memory" Website is wonderful, for instance; several universities have a strong in-house and online presence in American music.

But utilizing any of these sources without a strong, disciplined, broadly- and DEEPLY-informed background is ... well, ultimately fraught with grave difficulty. Take the responsibility seriously. It requires a great deal of patience, a maturity of approach, persistence, and a willingness to "go the distance." It isn't easy and quick, and instant gratification is absolutely not the norm -- nor should it be. To that end one must research any music one wants to perform at EVERY level ... including and especially the "non-musical." Be intensely THOUGHTFUL. Only then can you approach interpreting the music organically -- and responsibly. Remember, also, that an audience makes music WITH you! Remembering that helps you avoid over-intellectualizing a piece or a performance.

BSR: Are there any programs that you are working on now?

MAGGI: All of our programs are continually being updated with new or more extensive research and added repertoire. We are, literally, ALWAYS working. We often add elements to existing programs for specific events such as our recent performance at Colonial Williamsburg, where we added music and historical narrative specific to the Battle of Williamsburg to our "Civil War from Cause to Cost" concert.

BSR: Do you have a favorite program?

MAGGI: Currently, we are deriving a great deal of fun and artistic satisfaction in developing our seasonal concert cycles -- we fill them with music drawn from literally everywhere, which keeps us on our toes performing in widely variant styles, and challenges our skills both musical and intellectual. We also love to program interesting juxtapositions, such as a deeply traditional folk ballad followed by a jazz standard, interspersed with spirituals, ethnic musics, pop songs, instrumental pieces, or a work by a living composer. And of course, we include storytelling and humor, encourage audience interaction, and ... well, there's lots of energy to share!

BSR: Thanks for all of your wonderful comments Maggi, I could keep chatting with you for hours, but that would be a whole book! It has been a joy meeting you.

For more information on Maggi Dalton concerts or to sign up for her FREE email news letter, please visit their website at www.singingstring.org or contact maggi@singingstring.org

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Jim and Maggi Dalton specialize in music of the 19th & 20th centuries from parlor & stage.

Instrumentation: mostly plucked strings & voices.



They perform music drawn from popular, folk & classic traditions, covering time periods from the Middle Ages to the present, focusing largely on American, Celtic & British Isles repertoire.

Concerts and programs contain commentary designed to place the music performed in historical context for the audience. Programs reflect the continual & ongoing research in which the two delight.

They also perform original songs & compositions. Jim and Maggi have released two recordings to date & have designed a full spectrum of programs, which they present nationwide.

They have been featured often on radio & television. PBS, ABC, NBC, & CBS affiliates, Cable Networks; NPR stations, NewsRadio, interview programs across the USA; feature stories in newspapers & magazines, i.e., *The Philadelphia Inquirer* & *Courier-Post*

They have performed at nationally-known venues (i.e., Colonial Williamsburg, Seneca Falls, the Harriet Beecher Stowe House) & countless local & regional venues nationwide.

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