

A pragmatic singer has persisted through hormonal, vocal, and career change

# Now What?

By SHANNON MERCER

Photo by John Remnison

Shannon Mercer as Pamina in the Opera Hamilton production of *The Magic Flute* in 2008

**At 39,** I'd just bought my own shoebox in the sky overlooking the downtown west hipster-lined streets of Toronto. I was so proud to finally own some equity that I believed represented my "worth"—or so I thought at the time. After all, I had been a successful, full-time, self-employed singer for almost 20 years. But I was also terrified, because my voice had begun to change.

The changes started as early as my mid-30s, when my upper register began to feel uncomfortable rather than effortless. My agility also started to suffer: Florid passages I once could throw off with aplomb became cumbersome and weighty. This was most worrisome because early music, with its often elaborate and showy repertoire, was my niche, my bread and butter, and I had earned an international reputation as a specialist.

As I approached my 40s, more obvious physical changes began: adult acne on my chest and weight gain, and my once sleek and shiny hair became coarse and frizzy. Without knowing for sure, I suspected these symptoms were due to changing hormones from oncoming menopause. I thought I was too young to even consider Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT), and so I never sought any official diagnosis. Some of these changes I could manage with medication (my dermatologist said I was "sensitive to my hormones"), but mostly, all I could do was allow the symptoms of early onset perimenopause to run their physiological course. Perimenopause is understood to be the time when the ovaries start to produce less estrogen. It lasts up until menopause, the point when the ovaries stop releasing eggs.

While writing this essay, I was curious to learn when the term perimenopause came into our modern-day lexicon. I reached out to Joanne Bozeman, a retired vocal instructor from Lawrence University in Appleton, WI, and co-author—with Nancy Bos and Cate Frazier-Neely—of *Singing Through Change: Women's Voices in Midlife and Beyond*. She directed me to a graph published by the National Institute for Health (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/?term=perimenopause>) that shows how the term has been in circulation since the 1950s but didn't really become common until the 1990s. She also explained how "the terms perimenopause and menopause used in the general public and media over the years have been imprecise regarding how they differ. When women say that they are 'in menopause' they are likely saying

that they are in perimenopause but are unfamiliar with the more modern term." Menopause is a specific point in time, the 365th day after the start of our last period. After that, we are post-menopausal. Perimenopause is difficult to diagnose because it is a gradual onset versus a point in time; the process may last 8-10 years.

My lowest point psychologically came when I began receiving negative feedback from my agent and conductors as vocal changes became more pronounced and difficult to conceal. Even a good friend who had always championed my talent told me honestly that "I sounded like an old woman." It was devastating. Throughout my career, I'd always been the reliable soprano, the stalwart, the hardest working, the most versatile. Now my voice was unreliable and causing me anxiety, while also threatening my livelihood. I felt very isolated and confused. Questions circled in my head: "Did I deserve this somehow?" "Is there something I could have done differently technically or physically to have avoided these changes?" "Should I have been better prepared for this to happen?"

It was not until very recently, after several years of uncertainty and confusion, that I began to get some answers: I read articles, spoke with experts, and reached out to friends in the industry about their experiences. My research has helped me to further understand, process, and accept these changes. I share my story with the hope of opening up the discussion and finally shedding some light on the possible effects of natural hormonal changes on the mature female voice during perimenopause.

In her article "One Singer's Experience with Perimenopause" in the March 2005 issue of *Classical Singer*, Joanne Bozeman stated that 20-30% of women report menopausal voice symptoms, yet most experts agree that this number is inaccurate and on the low side. Many women choose to remain silent about disclosing changes because, understandably, they fear it may jeopardize future employment.

While I was a young artist, I remember observing an operatic soprano mark an

entire rehearsal period. This practice for preserving vocal health and stamina is not considered unusual. In this instance, however, it became evident during the dress rehearsal that the soprano was suffering vocal symptoms and could not physically perform the role. I listened as all her high notes cracked and her vocal production appeared muscled and effortful. It was akin to watching someone "wrestle" with their voice. The next day, she was fired from the production and her understudy took over the role.

Looking back, I feel great empathy for her struggle. Unexpected negative vocal changes carry many layers of emotional stress, embarrassment, and self-blame. This hormonal upheaval, with its far-reaching effects that many singers go through, deserves much more attention than it currently receives.

But how can we navigate these changes if those directly involved with our vocal life are not properly informed? From our local church choir conductors to the heads of international musical organizations, it's not surprising that most of our collaborators and engagers are not fully aware of the complexities of such a sensitive issue, which, at first glance, may not appear directly related to the classical music industry. So where can we find support?

I was fortunate that I could turn to my family for emotional support, even though they had a limited understanding of the voice. My singer friends of a similar age were also going through their own vocal challenges, but none were parallel to mine. So, I reached out to my contemporaries for guidance, and though some were forthcoming with insights from their personal experiences, others had never suffered any vocal symptoms of hormonal change. I wondered why this topic had never come up in all my years of study in any class or discussion. At the same time most of the singers I spoke to wished there had been a more open dialogue about how these changes could affect the voice. I was frustrated and angry that such a natural physiological change was still considered taboo within the industry.



What I've come to learn is that hormonal symptoms of the singing voice is not a topic often studied even by experts in the field. I suppose this makes sense, considering that only a small percentage of women in the working world rely on their vocal instrument functioning at a high level to support themselves. Plus, there simply isn't a standard operating procedure to predict why or when these changes will occur. Some women experience few or no effects of hormonal change, while others experience physical changes but none that directly affect the voice. For some, the symptoms that occur in perimenopause (the years before the end of your last menstrual cycle) may feel more severe than those experienced in the period of menopause. While still having cycles (although irregular), I experienced all of the symptoms that fall into the more typical menopausal category.

The onset of my own symptoms happened more prematurely than most and were severe enough that they quickly affected my career. Some common symptoms I experienced and that I've heard repeated in conversations with friends and colleagues are: the loss or partial loss of the top register (especially "floating"); stiffening, locking, or choking feeling in the larynx; faster vocal fatigue; difficulty with onset; issues with staying in tune; cracking; and lack of ease with sustaining longer notes.

In basic physiological terms, during menopause estrogen levels drop, while natural testosterone (androgens) remains unopposed. Bozeman, in her article in *Classical Singer*, and Tamara Bernstein in "Is the Opera House Hot or Is It Just Me? (Effects of Menopause on the Voice)" in the same issue, suggest that this may cause the thickening of vocal folds and lowering of our vocal registers. For example, think of the feeling when you are suffering from a cold and wake up with your voice "in the basement." This is due to the swelling of the vocal folds, a common symptom that is obvious in many mature singers, and not only those who are classically trained.

Listen to an early recording of any female artist and then her later work, and

you may hear that her voice has naturally deepened and darkened (some of this color change comes from changes to the vocal tract over the years). During the menopausal transition, natural testosterone may also contribute to more facial hair, thinning scalp hair, as well as acne. Yet there is still a lot more to learn, as most of the research that exists has been done on voices 60 years and older, versus midlife/menopausal influenced singers. Even for early perimenopausal women such as myself, learning more about the effects of hormones on the voice is difficult, because a biopsy cannot be performed on living vocal cords.

As far as I know, studies have not yet been conducted to see if there is a correlation between collagen loss in maturing skin and how it affects the tiny structures of the vocal folds. Collagen, elastin, and hyaluronic acid—three "buzz" words in skincare—give the skin its supple and elastic properties. Specifically, they are components of the three layers of the *lamina propria*, a critical player in vocal fold vibration, which lies just under the *epithelium* (mucous membrane/surface of folds). As we age, we lose estrogen during menopause and our skin becomes "saggy," eventually leading to wrinkles. Therefore, it is thought that the *lamina propria* may also lose some of its supple and elastic properties, resulting in a stiff and less flexible voice.

A similar loss of vocal flexibility, difficulty with the very-high range, and sluggishness are also common complaints before and during menstruation. The higher levels of progesterone versus estrogen traps fluid in the tissues of the larynx creating puffer vocal folds. Unfortunately, during menopause this hormonal-relation may cause longer term fluid retention leading to even more vocal unpredictability.

In 2014, Martha Elliott conducted a very insightful survey titled "Singing Through Menopause," which was published in the Jan-Feb. 2017 issue of *Journal of Singing*. She received 130 responses: 72% were professional singers, 78% singing teachers, and 9% amateurs. It's not surprising that 45% of the respondents had similar soprano voices to mine, with ranges up to high

C. The group was made up mostly of classical singers, with a smaller percentage of musical theater, jazz, or "other," such as rock, pop, blues, and country. Elliott categorized the study into two sections: symptoms five years before stopping menstruation (perimenopause) and five years after (post-menopause).

Of those respondents who reported symptoms before stopping menstruation, the most troublesome areas seemed to be upper range, flexibility, color, power, stiffness, upper *passaggio*, and vibrato. Although the majority of women reported stopping menstruation between 50-55, some had early menopausal symptoms in their 30s or 40s due to surgery, cancer treatment, or other circumstances, while 48% said their symptoms started within a year of their last period. I suppose I fall into the "other" category: Although my age was not outside the realm of possibility for premature symptoms, I was still a more unusual case (lucky for me?!).

Fortunately, I had a wonderfully supportive coach with whom I worked during my most fruitful singing years. Having taught many female singers who had gone through similar changes, he suggested I apply for a grant to study with someone who could help rebuild my voice. I had already been making changes with his guidance to "bigger" repertoire that was more suitable to my heftier and less agile voice. Part of my successful application was to study this repertoire, and so I began biweekly visits to my new teacher for the process of rebuilding.

In the meantime, gigs had started to dwindle, and I needed work to help pay for my condo. I knew having had no experience in anything other than singing wouldn't look great on any resume. I had a singer friend who worked at a local skincare business, so I asked him if they were looking to hire. Because he was a senior member of the team and had a good relationship with the manager, I was hired. I was so relieved and knew this would be an ideal financial supplement to my grant. At no point did I ever think it was beneath me. Being a pragmatist, I figured it was what I needed to do to get through this transition.

To save on money, I rented out my condo and rented a small bedroom in a two-bedroom apartment from a generous friend. For six months, this was to be my new home, my new routine, my new life. There I was in my early 40s with a roommate, working retail part time and studying to fix my voice. It seemed light years away from my previous life of taking limos to a gig, staying in luxurious hotels, creating amazing music, earning great money, and wearing big gowns and jewels while performing on the world's biggest stages with the grandest artists.

The most heartbreaking aspect of all this change was what felt like going through a separation, even a divorce, from my family of singers. From speaking with colleagues who have gone through similar changes, this is often the hardest loss as a result of losing work. The realization that I no longer would be part of this community broke my heart. I would see Facebook posts of gigs with my colleagues, and my spirit would sink. I felt ostracized and pushed aside by organizations and conductors. At the root, it's simply a business, and if you have nothing to offer, they have no need of you, which is a bitter pill to swallow.

As the grant funds began to run out, it became evident that this particular teacher was not a good fit. It would be dishonest to it say it was because they weren't a great teacher. Rather, the tediousness of my voice being so unpredictable and the reality of having to start over from the beginning became too much. Even during my top earning years, I was a *working* singer and could not have afforded to take a career hiatus. Being solely financially responsible, I was not in a position to spend thousands on lessons and coachings, only to hemorrhage money. Frustration built as my musical brain was still quick and clear, but my voice just wasn't reacting. I even saw a highly respected ENT doctor to discuss the vocal changes and, hopefully, diagnose the issue. But my vocal cords were pristine; videos taken six months apart showed that there was no damage or obvious reason for my difficulties. The joy of singing was being sucked out, and I didn't enjoy driving this new Mack truck when I was used to a Mini Cooper.



Photo by Kathy Wittman

Shannon Mercer in the Boston Early Music Festival production of Handel's *Alcina* in 2018

Now I would need to rely more heavily on my retail employment. To help save money, I would go back and forth between living in and then renting out my condo for months while renting cheaper accommodations from friends. It was an unstable and unsettling time, which aggravated my anxiety.

Then, an opportunity came up to take over as manager of the store. I was excited about the prospect of working a steady job and not worrying about how to pay my mortgage. I accepted the position, though I maintained an hourly wage due to a few prior singing engagements. I did

the grind for almost 10 months: hiring, merchandizing, stock, organizing events, training, payroll, scheduling, and selling, to mention just few of my responsibilities. Eventually, I started dragging my feet, wondering why I could turn angry on a dime and frustrated because I felt underappreciated and underpaid. Something needed to give. I remember sitting on the subway on my way to work for a promotional meeting. I was sobbing uncontrollably while getting looks from passengers. My gut was telling me it wasn't for me, so I made the decision to step back from my managerial position. Now what?





Photo by Kathy Wittman

Shannon Mercer in Monteverdi's *Orfeo* at the Boston Early Musical Festival in 2012

Around this time, one of my closest friends mentioned an opening at a local music school. I applied, hoping that if I got the job, I had something to replace my retail work. This new job changed everything, and finally I felt like I belonged. All my music skills were useful and being appreciated. I was teaching piano, theory, and voice both in classical repertoire (The Royal Conservatory curriculum) and musical theater to students aged 7-18. My students brought me so much needed joy.

A year later, once my brain began to defog from uncertainty, I made the decision to sell my condo. Honestly, the best decision I ever made! After the sale, I realized that owning property did not in any way represent my life's work as a singer and that no one could take away what I'd achieved. Today, I rent a beautiful

one-bedroom basement apartment from my friend where I'm both extremely comfortable and very happy.

In terms of my singing career, I doubt it will ever be as effortless or as enjoyable for me as it once was. Plus, the anxiety that comes from not knowing what quality of voice I will produce is not worth the energy. Life is about finding balance: All I can do is try to enjoy a few gigs while moving forward. I can't say that I'll never sing again, but I'm OK refocusing right now until I feel ready to try. I've been told that a number of singers report that their voices resettle after menopause, once hormones calm down. The voice may be different but more stable. I look forward to finding singing enjoyable once again, but right now I'm not pressuring myself one way or the other.

In March 2020, during the beginning of the COVID shutdown in Toronto, all of my lessons went online. Like many teachers unaccustomed to working over video full time, it took quite a bit of adjusting in terms of gadgets, formatting, online resources, and tools. Now, a year into the pandemic, I'm really enjoying the new routine, the comforts of home, and all the benefits of teaching online, but, of course, I miss seeing the kiddos in person. Last summer, I learned that the Glenn Gould School—affiliated with The Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto—was looking for someone to teach a course in early music performance practices in voice. Since January 2021, I've been teaching this course, online, which focuses on vocal repertoire from 17th- and 18th-century Europe.

I continued to work at the store once a week until a few months ago, when it became clear that my teaching schedule left me too busy. I departed in November 2020 and found out this past January that due to COVID-related financial stress, the store would be closing its doors permanently in February. This brings me to my Facebook post, which sparked so much discussion and interest, inspiring this article. In February, I took my last trip up to the store (which only had curbside service at the time) to say my final goodbyes to my co-workers and to the store that had helped me through one of the hardest and most unexpected transitions of my adult life. I'd be lying if I said that I never felt as though my spirit was being squashed or my passion being extinguished while working there. But without this job and the emotional support of family and friends, I wouldn't have been able to stay afloat. I'm grateful for everything I learned along the way, the skills I acquired, the friendships I made. But most of all, I'm proudest of finding new strength and resilience within myself.

More studies need to be done on perimenopausal symptoms and their effects on the voice: This motivates me to continue the conversation. I'm kinder to myself now, knowing that through no fault of my own, these dramatic changes were going to occur regardless of my actions or choices. It wasn't, as I had initially thought, because of bad technique or overuse, and that realization has given me the confidence to speak openly. If my own experience can help someone through a difficult transition, then I want to continue to be transparent and to offer female singers the support and information that I and so

many others who struggled wished they'd had.

There is a support group on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/singingthroughchange>) that offers candid and honest, non-judgmental discussion and even seminars. This resource has been a godsend for improving my mental health.

My journey wasn't easy, and sometimes I still struggle with the reality of not being a full-time singer. But as Dame Sarah Connolly, the wonderful English mezzo-soprano, once said, "My strengths are changing the older I get." Throughout all this uncertainty surrounding the pandemic and the future of the arts, I want to tell all those amazing artists facing any type of transition that they are not alone. That no matter what job, whether outside of your real passion or temporary, it doesn't make you a lesser person or for that matter a lesser artist. It doesn't diminish your talent or negatively impact upon what you bring or brought to the art form.

As supporters of the arts community, let's try and stop judging those who have to make difficult decisions to survive this precarious business, especially now. You never know what someone is going through, whether it's navigating hormonal changes or—who'd have thought?—enduring a pandemic. Let us praise talent and equally praise the courage it takes to successfully navigate life. For female singers who are approaching a certain wonderful age, let's keep the conversation about vocal symptoms due to hormonal changes open and honest. Soon they will find themselves on the other side, changed for the better, with a stronger and clearer voice.

*Canadian soprano Shannon Mercer embraces a range of repertoire from early to contemporary music. She has performed in operas, concerts, and recitals throughout North America and Europe, made many recordings, and passed on knowledge of singing to the next generation. For more information, go to [www.shannonmercer.com](http://www.shannonmercer.com)*

# Early Music Now

Thallis Hoyt Drake, Founder  
Charles Grosz, Executive & Artistic Director

SEASON  
20  
ACROSS BORDERS • 21 • ACROSS TIME

## Lecture Series

A series of six online lectures with musical illustrations by experts in the study and performance of Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque music. Available at no cost online at [earlymusicnow.org](http://earlymusicnow.org), and YouTube.



**Anne Azéma,**  
Artistic Director,  
Boston Camerata

*High Waves on the Sea:  
Songs of Distance  
and Separation,  
Then and Now*



**Paul O'Dette,**  
Artistic Director,  
Boston Early Music Festival

*What Makes It Great:  
An Exploration of the  
Extraordinary, Yet Often  
Misunderstood, Lute Music  
of the Early Renaissance*



**Tim Sterner Miller,**  
Senior Lecturer, Musicology  
and Ethnomusicology at  
University of Wisconsin-  
Milwaukee

*Burn My Heart with  
a Flame: The Sacred  
Passions of Isabella  
Leonarda*



**Sarah Mead,**  
Professor of Music,  
Brandeis University

*The Poetry of Vittoria  
Colonna; the Music of  
Pietro Vinci*



**Scott Metcalfe,**  
Artistic Director,  
Blue Heron

*Guillaume de Machaut:  
A Century of Music*



**Andrew Larsen,**  
Lecturer,  
Marquette University

*The Women of  
Medieval Europe*

EARLYMUSICNOW.ORG