

Making Music Together: Equality and Mutual Creativity as Collaborative Peers

By Gary L. Ingle

Sonya Headlam, soprano, and Martin Néron, pianist, will perform on the Opening Session recital at the 2024 MTNA National Conference. This musical collaboration is an artistic partnership, with each contributing to the artistic vision for their performances. MTNA Executive Director & CEO Gary L. Ingle had the opportunity to ask Sonya and Martin a few questions and shares their responses.

Sonya Headlam

Soprano Sonya Headlam performs music that spans centuries, from the Baroque era to the present. A passionate recitalist, Headlam performs a diverse array of art songs, from popular standards to lesser-known gems and is equally comfortable on the opera stage. Sonya holds a DMA degree from Rutgers University, where she received the Michael Fardink Memorial Award, and bachelor's and master's degrees from Miami University.

Gary Ingle: We're looking forward to your recital at the National Conference. Please tell me about your musical training.

Sonya Headlam: Both my mother and father grew up in Jamaica, where their families had strong ties to music and the arts. As a result, I was fortunate to grow up with parents who

were committed to providing a solid musical foundation for their children. My siblings and I all started piano lessons when we were 5 years old. In the beginning, I struggled mightily with coordinating my right and left hands. I was probably 8 or 9 when I first begged my parents to let me quit, but they firmly insisted that I persevere. Thank goodness they did. By the time I was 12, playing the piano and singing were two of my favorite things to do. My siblings and I all remained dedicated to our piano lessons until we graduated from high school.

In high school, I was a member of the senior ensemble, a small vocal ensemble that performed a vast array of music, from Renaissance madrigals and Baroque classics like Vivaldi's *Gloria* to African American spirituals and jazz. We had a wonderful choir director who encouraged us all to take private voice lessons, which I began at the age of 16. My first voice instructor was instrumental in my early vocal development. Not only did he teach me the fundamentals of singing, but he also encouraged me to take my training seriously and instilled confidence in my abilities. I was very fortunate to attend a high school that offered an advanced placement (AP) music theory class, and I also participated in all of the high school musical productions.

GI: What made you decide to pursue a voice career?

SH: I've had a strong affinity for music since I was young. My mom recalls being cautious about what music was playing around me when I was a child because a slow song in a minor key would often leave me in tears. Long before I knew the meaning of song lyrics, I had a deep emotional reaction to music.

I was fortunate to have parents who recognized my passion and encouraged me to pursue it further. I chose to study voice in college, knowing I wanted music to be a central part of my life. I didn't initially see myself as a performer. I wanted to become a high school or elementary school music teacher, and I applied to colleges intending to major in music education. However, after my undergraduate auditions, it became clear that schools were interested in putting me on the performance track. The head of the voice department at one university even reached out to my parents to discuss this, and once again, my parents played a vital role by assisting me in working through that decision. In the end, I switched my major to voice performance.

GI: When you first walked through the doors at Miami University, what were your musical goals?

SH: When I first walked through the doors at Miami University, my primary goal was to get a thorough education in music, specifically developing my vocal technique and a strong foundation in music theory and history. I was eager to expand my vocal repertoire, gain performance experience and immerse myself in the world of classical music. From singing in Chamber Singers to participating in opera workshop, taking theory and history classes with wonderful faculty and participating in the university concerto competition, Miami University provided a wonderful and nurturing environment where I was able to achieve these goals. I gained a lot of performance experience there and worked with a world-class teacher.

GI: What are those goals now?

SH: The overarching objective of keeping music at the forefront of my life has persisted since my childhood. I continue to study voice with both a teacher and a coach in order to

continue developing and refining my technique as well as all the other skills required to hone my artistry. Being an educator remains at the forefront, as I find immense joy in sharing my knowledge and experience with singers of all ages as they embark on their own musical journeys. In recent years, I've become increasingly interested in performing contemporary classical music. I find a lot of joy in working with living composers and being a part of the process of seeing a new work come to life for the first time. I currently have a busy performance schedule, but when things slow down, I am eager to devote more time to teaching, researching and writing about music and curating my own special projects, some of which I have been contemplating for years.

GI: Tell us about your work with the United Nations and any influence that has had on your career today.

SH: I had a deeply rewarding career at UNICEF's New York headquarters, within the Programme Division, where a large part of my work involved recruitment efforts for positions across the globe in various critical areas, including health, HIV/AIDS, education, water and sanitation, nutrition and child protection, among others. What I loved most about my time at UNICEF was the meaningful connections I formed with my colleagues. The opportunity to collaborate with people from diverse backgrounds, fields, cultures and perspectives deepened my insight into the global community, its pressing challenges and the efforts being made to overcome them. It is an experience that has forever altered my worldview, making me more aware of the interconnectedness of our planet and the complexities and challenges involved in addressing global issues.

During my time there, I also had the distinct privilege of being a member of the UN Singers, one of the oldest recreational clubs for UN staff, unofficially designated by the UN Secretary-General as goodwill ambassadors. The group frequently embarks on missions to promote peace and mutual understanding through folk music sung in their original languages from around the globe. Two of the most unforgettable experiences of my career were participating in these missions, one in China and the other in Japan.



Sonya Headlam

GI: I'm sure those UN missions were very memorable, but what has been your most memorable performance?

SH: When I reflect on my most memorable performance, it's not the prestigious venues or career highlights that come to mind. Instead, I'm transported to a place of deep personal significance—my great uncle's veranda in Kingston, Jamaica.

My great uncle, Gerald "Buddy" Pouyat, affectionately known as Uncle Buddy, was a pioneer of the modern Jamaican art movement and a renowned actor, dancer and director. Together with my aunt, Cissy Pouyat, they hosted a weekly salon on their veranda for over three decades. The salon served as a center for artistry, creativity and connection.

Every Saturday, people from various walks of life, including artists, poets, playwrights, musicians, politicians, academics and more, would gather there. It was a simple yet extraordinary setting in his beautiful garden, with the air filled with the aroma of delicious Jamaican breakfast and Blue Mountain coffee, vibrant conversations and an explosion of artistic expression. People would come from all over the island to share a poem, a song or simply to sit and enjoy the atmosphere.

During my annual visits to Jamaica, I had the privilege of performing for family and friends on Uncle Buddy's veranda. Each time, I experienced a unique and magical resonance in that space, one that words cannot adequately describe. These intimate performances taught me invaluable lessons about the power of music, its ability to create shared emotional experiences and its capacity to bring us together. Although Uncle Buddy left us in 2021, his legacy lives on in the hearts and memories of everyone he touched. His veranda remains a special place in my heart, and it is a continuing source of inspiration for every performance I undertake.

GI: Tell me about your partnership with Martin Néron.

SH: I first met Martin during an audition in Princeton, New Jersey, when my son was still a toddler. Coming off a singing hiatus, I was pretty nervous, but the moment I sang my aria with Martin at the piano, I immediately felt comfortable and supported. Martin's sensitivity to the music and to me as a singer was evident from the start. Thanks to his attentiveness and his commitment to the present moment, it went from being an audition to the two of us making music together, which is kind of the best-case scenario for any audition. I was lucky to get the part, but I was even more lucky to meet him—and I wasn't going to let him walk out of my life after that.

We quickly became great friends and musical collaborators. We've shared the stage in numerous recitals, and Martin plays a crucial role in all my musical preparations. When I'm ready to delve into the subtleties of style, nuance, language and presentation, Martin is my trusted ear and eye, offering invaluable insights along the way.

Martin Néron

Martin Néron is faculty at Westminster Choir College and artistic director of the Vocalis Consort, an ensemble that strives to showcase overlooked vocal works. He designed and managed the Canto Latino CyberChallenge Competition in 2021. Martin holds degrees from the Manhattan School of Music (DMA), Westminster Choir College (MM) and Université de Montréal (BM).

Gary Ingle: Tell us about your work with Sonya Headlam.

Martin Néron: I met Sonya while she was pursuing her DMA at Rutgers, but the very first time that I met her and played for her was on the occasion of the opera audition that Sonya mentions in Princeton.



Martin Néron

We had never played together, and we had not rehearsed her aria. Yet, when she started singing and as we performed the aria, it felt as if time has stopped. It was one of those moments that happen once in a lifetime. It was an instant connection. She sang like a Goddess. Not very long after that, if I recall, Sonya and I met after an event at Rutgers and that is when we planned or first (of many) collaborations.

In the preparation for recitals, Sonya and I engage in a collaborative process characterized by attentive listening, the exchange of ideas and the alignment of our perspectives. This synergy enables us to craft performances that distinctly reflect our artistic partnership. It is imperative to underscore that, in our collaborative endeavors, I do not assume a conventional vocal coaching role with Sonya. Such a hierarchical dynamic would compromise the equality and mutual creativity we strive to uphold. Instead, we function as collaborative peers, with each of us contributing to the artistic vision.

There are instances where our collaboration extends beyond performance preparation, involving repertoire work for performances in which I am not directly involved. During these periods, I assume the role of an external set of ears, providing valuable insights and serving as a supportive vocal coach. This dynamic underscores the adaptability and depth of our collaborative relationship.

GI: Tell us about your early musical background.

MN: I began my musical education with focused studies in solo piano at the Quebec Conservatoire, followed by continued training at the Université de Montréal. Alongside my piano studies, I explored the field of oboe at the conservatoire, broadening my musical interests.

Though my dedication to piano became apparent early on, the idea of pursuing a career in music solidified during my college years. This period marked a time of self-discovery and realization, where the profound impact of music started shaping my ambitions and influencing my direction.

GI: When did you turn to collaborative arts, and why the focus on voice?

MN: Upon completing my degree at the Université de Montréal, I pursued a master's degree in collaborative piano at Westminster Choir College with a specific focus on

collaborative arts. Interestingly, my exposure to vocal repertoire was relatively limited at that point. While my proficiency in solo piano repertoire was comprehensive, the world of vocal music remained unexplored.

I was drawn to collaborative arts because I found joy in making music with fellow musicians, shifting away from solo performances. What fascinated me about voice was its connection to literature. My love for literature began in my early years, influenced by my older sister who studied French literature in college. She introduced me to a rich world of literary works.

By the end of high school, I had explored various French writers and poets. This literary background made discovering a musical genre blending poetry and music particularly captivating. Collaborating in vocal repertoire lets me combine two of my passions—literature and music—creating a harmonious blend that resonates deeply with my artistic sensibilities.

GI: Who have been some of the most influential people in your career?

MN: Two luminaries stand out as profoundly influential in shaping my musical trajectory. The late Denise Massé played an instrumental role in introducing me to the realm of art songs and operas. Under her guidance, I not only acquired a refined approach to playing orchestral scores but also cultivated an enduring passion for the nuanced world of art songs.

Another pivotal figure in my journey was the late Dalton Baldwin, a force of nature who left an indelible mark on everyone fortunate enough to collaborate with him. Dalton possessed an innate ability to extract the best from every pianist or singer he worked with, nurturing their creativity and artistry. His relentless pursuit of heightened awareness served as a testament to the idea that elevating oneself as an artist requires a continuous quest for deeper understanding on spiritual, emotional and psychological planes. Dalton's insatiable curiosity and openness to the new and unknown stand as a timeless reminder of the imperative to remain receptive to the ever-evolving dimensions of our craft.

GI: How did you become interested in the works of underrepresented composers?

MN: My interest in the works of underrepresented composers was sparked early on, thanks

to the guidance of Dalton Baldwin. Under his mentorship, I was fortunate to explore vocal music from composers outside the confines of the traditional Western canon. The musical contributions of these composers, originating from cultures not conventionally featured in recitals, have coexisted with more traditional music for as long as the latter has existed.

The core issue, in my view, lies in the lack of acknowledgment rather than the absence of this music. While the existence of such compositions is widely recognized, the decision to bring them into the spotlight, whether in recitals or academic settings, remains a matter of personal choice. Unfortunately, the prevalent oversight of this rich and diverse musical landscape persists, and the choice to ignore it is still a viable option for many.

In my role as a college-level vocal literature instructor, I've encountered a noticeable gap in available reference materials on art songs. Recommending a comprehensive book to my students becomes a challenging task as even the most widely used references in academia often suffer from blatant omissions, particularly in the representation of BIPOC composers of American art songs. The absence of critical discourse around this issue is, to me, the most pressing concern, signaling a need for a more inclusive and reflective approach to the study and appreciation of vocal music.

GI: And your interest in Poulenc?

MN: Poulenc occupies a unique position among composers, demonstrating an exceptional ability to transcend the mere musical setting of a literary text. His mastery lies in the profound integration of the poet's symbols into his musical language, effectively illuminating the deeper connotations embedded within the text. Despite not being recognized as a major composer during his time, Poulenc's music has withstood the test of time, proving itself to be timeless and resonant across generations. His compositions possess a lasting relevance that extends far beyond the boundaries of his era, underscoring the enduring significance of his artistic contributions.

GI: Tell us more about the inception of the Canto Latino Online International Competition and the Vocalis Consort.

MN: The inception of Canto Latino Online International Competition emerged as a response to the challenges imposed by the

pandemic. Collaborating with soprano Andrea Salazar, we envisioned a platform that would enable singers and pianists to continue expressing their art in a time when live recitals were on pause. Utilizing the video format, we aimed to provide a space for contestants to showcase not only their vocal prowess but also their artistic vision, resourcefulness and ingenuity. The response exceeded our expectations, with over 160 contestants from 17 countries and a distinguished jury of internationally renowned specialists. The success of the competition, coupled with generous funding, allowed us to award eight distinct prizes, each recognizing a different facet of Latin American art song. While the workload of managing all aspects of the competition was substantial, the experience proved to be immensely enriching.

Vocalis Consort, established a decade ago in 2013, initially served as a platform for my students at Westminster Choir College. Evolving rapidly, it transformed into a professional ensemble comprising colleagues and friends, including Sonya. At the heart of Vocalis is a commitment to diversity, not only excelling in the core *mélodie* and Lied repertoire but also expanding the scope of the art song recital beyond the "traditional" Western European canon. Our programs have explored exclusive showcases of Peruvian composers, French cabaret songs and works by American composers. Notably, our recent programs, such as "La Contradanza," delved into the exploration of racial and musical metissage in Latin American art songs, while "Crossing Genres" offered a unique blend of Broadway, folk and popular songs presented in an acoustic setting.

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The Opening Session of the 2024 MTNA National Conference is at 7:30 P.M., Saturday, March 16.

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